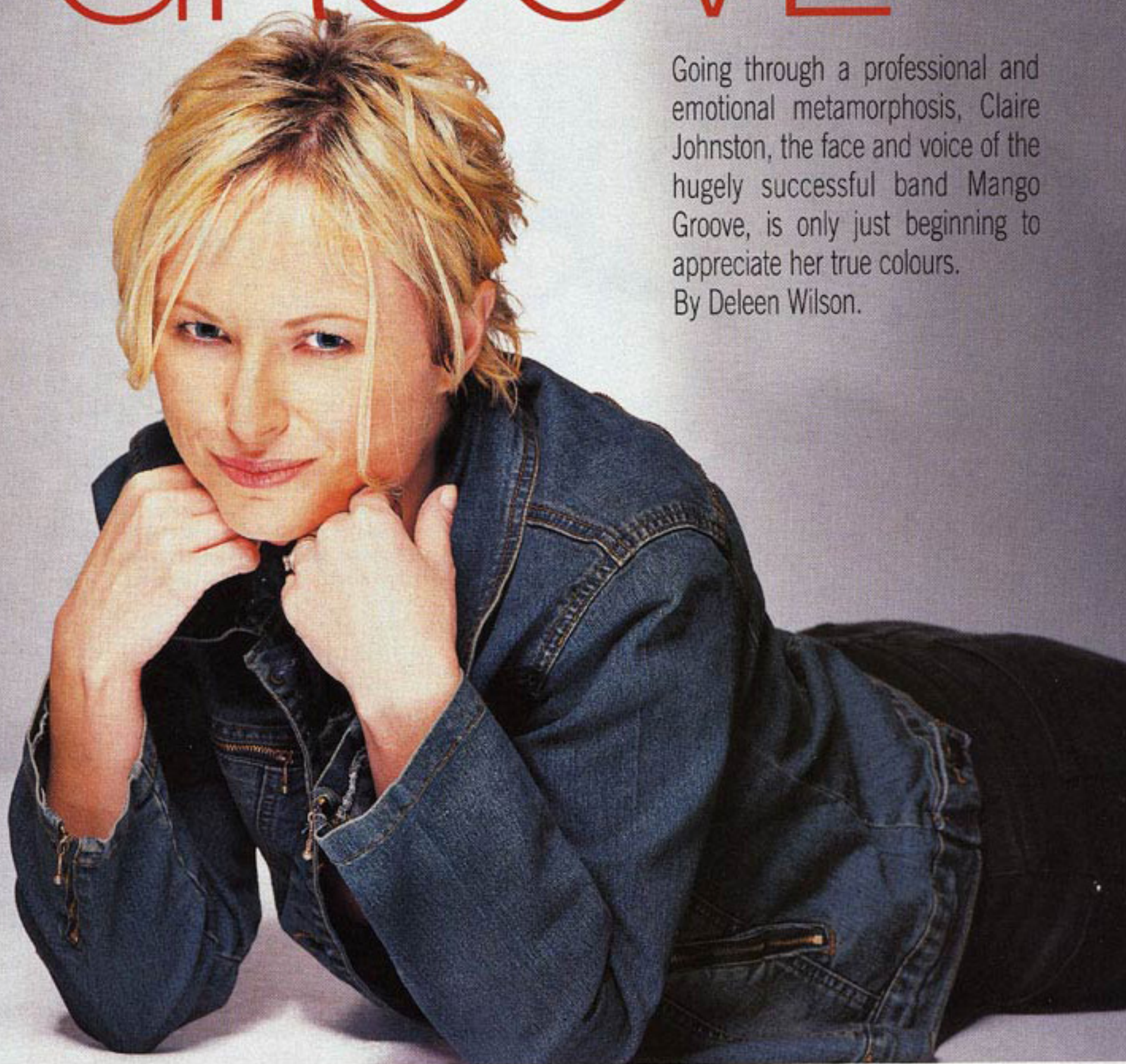


# In A New GROOVE

Going through a professional and emotional metamorphosis, Claire Johnston, the face and voice of the hugely successful band Mango Groove, is only just beginning to appreciate her true colours.  
By Deleen Wilson.





1989



As lead singer with Mango Groove, Claire Johnston enjoyed sell-out shows in London, Paris, Hong Kong and Sydney; performed at Freddie Mercury's tribute concert which was satellite-linked to over one billion people around the world; sang at the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela; topped the bill at the Montreux Jazz Festival, and took part in the concert celebrating the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China. But what strikes you instantly about this superstar is that she's disarmingly normal. Even somewhat vulnerable.

Recovering from flu, suffering from lack of sleep and sitting pretty, hair sopping wet and face devoid of any make-up, the only clue to her celebrity status at the photo shoot is the buzz of beautifying activity around her. Not a trace of attitude, she thanks the hairstylist, chats comfortably with her long-time friend and make-up artist, and is remarkably candid about her current "emotional voyage of discovery", the inevitable result of a difficult childhood.

Johnston enjoyed singing from a young age, but when her father left home when she was only eight, she was spurred on by a need for attention that led her into the lead role of *Annie* when she was 10, and fronting one of South Africa's longest-running and widely enjoyed groups when she was 17.

A self-confessed extremist, Johnston placed huge emphasis on her first solo album, *Fearless*, released last year. "I waited so long for it that for a while I completely lived the album to the exclusion of almost everything else. Now I understand that it's just one album in a series I'll do - not the Holy Grail."

This realisation is a glimmer of the constant warfare Johnston has within herself to achieve. "I'm all or nothing. I'm either at gym every day or not at all. I either eat too much or too little. I'll take vitamins regularly and then not for months. I never get the balance right. But now at least I understand that balance is the key to it all, and that's what I'm aiming for."

Married in 1999 at 31, husband John is also a member of Mango Groove and was her boyfriend and best friend of eight years. Sharing her first love of music while also indulging a passion for philosophy, he understands and complements Johnston, enjoying the double-edged honour of being the only person she trusts enough to really throw her toys at.

"Claire is a strange yet captivating mix, and even I don't always understand her. She has weird habits - she can repeat any word backwards very

1991



1994



2000



quickly – and she beats herself up far too much, but fundamentally she is optimistic and generous, bright and engaging, and these things that are amazing about her allow her to be very insightful about herself as an individual.”

But after years of an exciting yet relatively unstable lifestyle, a settled and calm home life is now essential to Johnston. “It’s one thing living out of a suitcase, quite another living out of an emotional suitcase as well.”

Now 34, Johnston is giving thought to having children, though her approach to them is somewhat unorthodox and unmaternal. “I would regret not having children and I do get broody sometimes, especially when I see a cute little bundle. I have a lot planned for this year, but one of the projects I might be able to squeeze in would be having a child.”

Johnston also needed to deal with the issue of her absent father before she felt emotionally able to deal with children of her own. After no contact with him for 22 years, she tracked him down in England three years ago, but the reunion wasn’t as she had anticipated, and failed to provide either the answers or the closure she had hoped for.

“He didn’t go out of his way to reassure me. I wanted him to say certain things, and he didn’t and that time has passed, it’s been ruined. I really believe that little girls get a sense of themselves as potential ‘women’ from the person they first know as their father, as boys get a sense of themselves as ‘men’ from their mothers.

“The father I knew was moody and often violent. He only became interested in me when I could hold a fluid conversation, and especially sing, but it was around this time my parents divorced and my father left the country.

“The fact that he vanished only served to confirm my sense that I was not lovable, pretty, good or clever enough. That sort of thing can stay with you all your life, unless you take the decision to confront and change it.”

Johnston’s first solo album has been a long time coming, but the general consensus is that it has been well worth the wait. Its textured, evocative sound blends the latest pop influences with a

diverse range of live instruments, and has been a delicious surprise for fans.

Recording took place at three of England’s top studios and Johnston carefully sourced original songs from some of the world’s best songwriters, including Marie-Claire d’Ubaldo (Celine Dion, *Falling Into You*), Billy Steinberg (Madonna, *Like a Virgin*), Pam Sheyne (Christina Aguilera, *Genie in a Bottle*), and Rick Astley.

The album title, *Fearless*, was chosen because it suggests conviction and

everyone’s done that at some time, it’s just that I did it a bit more publicly!”

Cooking is her current form of relaxation, tying her to the normality of a routine and providing a certain grounding. Italian and Thai are often on the menu. “I try and cook quite healthily, and I’ve been interested in vegetarianism to some degree since I was 15. I went through a stage of never cooking with olive oil, but I do now because I think a certain amount of oil is necessary, and probably good for you.

“I don’t think this fat-free thing can last, it’s no way to live; believe me, I took it to extremes. But I come back to my belief that there must be some sort of balance; you’ll have bad days where you eat and drink rubbish, but as long as you follow it with some good days, that’s all we can hope for. I mean, who can live on water and fresh air every day?”

Within her framework of inconsistencies, the one regular habit Johnston has is her skin routine. Hating to jump into bed with a face that hasn’t been scrubbed clean and lathered with toner and moisturiser, she repeats the process in the morning. “But I have to wash my face with water, not just cleanser. I love that clean, fresh feeling.”

Not exempt from the effects of ageing, Johnston is acutely aware of the pressure to remain youthful, line-free and skinny. “I worry about my looks as I get older, although I’ve always been fundamentally unhappy with my appearance. I wanted to be tall and long and lean. But I know I’ll never be that, so in that sense I’m starting to vaguely like myself a little more. 34 is actually still quite young and we often just feel old because we have the Britney Spiers’s to compete with.

“At one stage, I thought that all the people I saw in magazines were real, that they looked like that naturally while I could only achieve this polished look when I’d been professionally made up. Now I know the media sells us a myth of what women are about; it’s not an accurate portrayal, it’s not reality and as I get older I’m a bit more forgiving of the way I look.”

Would she ultimately bow to the knife? “When it comes to surgery I’d like to think I wouldn’t do it, but who knows if the pressure gets too great?” An honest, thoughtful answer, like the woman herself. 🍊



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strength, appropriate connotations for a first solo outing. But what really appealed to Johnston about the name was the fact that it was loaded with irony: the thought of finally relinquishing the album to an “uncaring world” filled her with fear.

Johnston’s image throughout her time with Mango Groove was highly theatrical and somewhat tongue-in-cheek. The effect for her new album, however, shows a definite toning down to a more subtle, somewhat mature but just as polished performer.

“I had this idea that I would have a totally new makeover for the album, and I’d come out with an incredible new image. But actually, I really just came out being me. I’ve always been a frustrated actress and Mango was always a stage for my desire to dress up.

“Now, though, I’m much simpler in my taste in clothes. I make less effort because I’m less image-obsessed. I’ve made some seriously disastrous image mistakes over the years, cramming myself into outfits that just didn’t work. I suppose