

## YES I use Botox, NO I am not gay: Simon Cowell's frankest interview

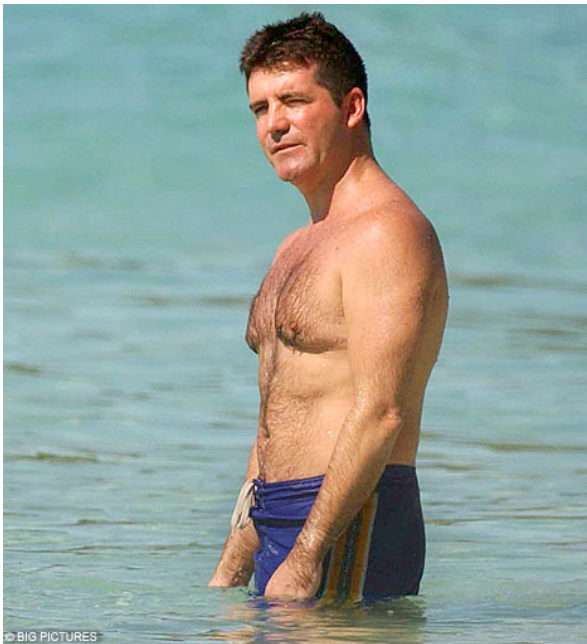
JENNY JOHNSTON - 17th November 2007

Best to be blunt with Simon Cowell, surely? Dither about too much and you risk being cut off mid-question, dismissed as the most irritating interviewer in the world, and marched from the room while he drums his fingers on the table. So, quickly now, what do we all want to know about the multi-millionaire Mr X Factor himself - apart from his PIN number?

The problem is where to begin. What we really want to know are things that are really, frankly, a bit rude to ask over coffee. Is he gay? Is his hair real? Is he real, or just one of Sharon Osbourne's plastic surgery add-ons? How rich is he? Did he ask Kylie to join him as a judge on The X Factor before he asked her sister Dannii? Is there a vacancy for a Mrs Cowell?

Let's start with something a bit more general, though, in the interests of actually staying in the room. Is he really the vainest man on TV? He seems amused rather than angry at the question, which is a good start.

"Vain? Yeah, I am. But to be honest with you, I can't think of one person who is on TV who isn't vain. It's the nature of the beast. If you are on TV then you have a vanity, for sure. Just admit it! Why not?"



Pecs appeal: Simon Cowell on one of his many Caribbean holidays

Goodie. We like admissions. Has he had copious cosmetic surgery then? His fellow X Factor judge Louis Walsh thinks he might have had pectoral implants.

"No, absolutely not. I have not had cosmetic surgery," he sniggers.

Botox then? He sucks his (extraordinarily white) teeth.

"Yes, I've had Botox, but not in an obsessive way. Then again, every guy I know who works in the City has had it now."

And what about the hair? Louis thinks it might be a wig. Then again, Louis is a known troublemaker, and Simon did fire him once.

"No, it's all real. I've never dyed my hair, ever, and I wouldn't," he says emphatically, though his eyes twinkle rather furiously.

"But yes, I like to take care of myself. I work out. I take lots of vitamins. What can I say? I think I look good for my age [he's 48]."

"In the morning, I have a very set routine - Brenda, my housekeeper, brings me breakfast in bed, and it's always the same thing: Porridge, papaya juice, fresh fruit and a smoothie. I read the papers, have a bath, and everything is very calm."

Perhaps with a £100million fortune and five homes, including a £7million former ambassador's residence in London - and a global team of "Brendas" who are paid to know exactly how he likes his papaya juice - it's easy to be calm.

He is arguably the most powerful man in the British music business (he'd quibble with the "arguably" bit). One word from him makes or breaks dreams, careers, lives.

Quite how far he has come defies belief. But the journey explains an awful lot about him.



Staying single: Cowell refuses to wed long-term love Terri Seymour

He tells me that as a teenager he once auditioned for a job with Tesco, then quickly corrects himself - "audition? Sorry, I've got auditions on the brain. I mean interview" - but you get the picture. Anyway, he failed to impress and the rejection is keenly remembered.

"The guy in charge had a go at me for turning up in jeans," he remembers, with considerable venom. "Maybe I shouldn't have. Who knows? But that was that. He hated me, and I hated him. I vowed that I'd find a job where I didn't have to wear a suit and play by the rules. So I did."

Thirty or so years later, there is no doubting that Cowell is a hugely successful self-made man. He says the defining moment of his professional life came when he was 29, and lost everything.

The record company he was working for went under and Cowell - heavily dependent on his shares - went with it. It made him vow never to depend on anyone else ever again in his life.

"On one level, going bust didn't bother me. It was the Eighties, and there wasn't the stigma about bankruptcy that you might think. My mates weren't bothered. My dad was in business - he knew that it happened, too. He loaned me the money to bail me out, and I got a loan from the bank to pay him back. It was £1,000 a month, I seem to remember.

"In a way it was exciting to start all over again because I did it on such different terms. Every penny I earned was, well, mine - and no one was going to take it away again. It made life so much sweeter.

"Before, I'd been this walking, talking Eighties cliché; I lived this life of excess; out every night, partying. I had all the material stuff - the big house, flash cars - but all of it had been bought on credit. None of it was really mine.

"The biggest shock when I lost it all was the realisation that so much of my life had been out of my control. When I started to make the money back, I vowed that it would never happen again.

"I bought things only when I could afford them. There was no big mortgage, no cars on hire purchase. I remember buying a TR6 sports car for £6,000, and funnily enough it gave me more pleasure than the Porsche ever had."

His father - who ran the property division of EMI, the company which would ultimately give Simon his big break - was a huge influence.

The best lesson he taught his son, Simon says, was not to believe the hype - about himself, any company that he might work for, or any product that he might peddle.

He died of a massive heart attack on the very day that Simon celebrated his first Number One with a then-unknown band called Westlife.

'The ultimate irony,' he says. 'The worst thing that could happen, and the best - all in the one day. It just shocked me to the core. I just never thought my dad wouldn't be around. I phoned him to tell him about the Number One, because that's what I did. When something good

happened, I called my dad. At first my mother couldn't even tell me he was dead. She just listened to me burbling on. Then she called me back to tell me. Awful.'

What, you have to wonder, would his dad make of all this - the riches, the notoriety, the incessant jibes about his sexuality?

'He would say: "Don't take anything too seriously." Take the business seriously, yes, but the rest - No.'

He particularly wouldn't have wanted Simon to take himself seriously.

"If he thought I was getting a bit big for my boots, he'd just give me a look," he says, rather touchingly. "That would be enough."



Doing what he does best: Judging on The X Factor

Simon himself has never wanted children, which strikes me as odd, firstly because he says family is so important, but secondly because of the legendary size of his ego.

Isn't the most egotistical thing in the world to want to recreate yourself? He physically shudders at the thought of it.

"I love kids - at least when they are old enough to talk. But my own? No. I'm terrified of the responsibility. Where would they fit in? I have to be able to fly to Los Angeles at a minute's notice."

And children, of course, cannot be controlled, in the way that staff, pop proteges and even girlfriends can be controlled?

"That's true," he says. "I am a little bit of a control freak, yes."

He says doesn't have that many close friends, which is surprising given that he is forever popping up in gossip columns with his 'best friend' Michael Winner, or his 'close confidante' Cilla Black.

I ask him to name the showbiz chums that he would put on the "best friends" list. He sucks those teeth.

"Er, Paul McKenna. Hmm. Actually, that's about it. There are people I like - yes, like Jeremy Clarkson - who I'll go out for a drink with, but baring my soul? No, not really for me."

Is he better with women? "Mainly, yes.

"Actually, some of those I am closest to are ex-girlfriends. Jackie St Clair (a former page three model) is one of my best friends. So is [the singer] Sinitta. I'm probably most comfortable with people who have known me for a long time."

It is the second time he has mentioned ex-girlfriends, but has been oddly silent on his current squeeze, model and TV presenter Terri Seymour. He has been with Terri for five years, which has surprised everyone, himself included.

The previous pattern seemed to be that he would flit from one model/lapdancer type to the next, getting shot of her long before any awkward questions were asked about marriage - or children.

He's terribly funny when you get him started on marriage - insisting it is an "outdated contract. It's nuts - needs to be overhauled". He also admits that the thought of handing over half of his fortune in some courtroom many years down the line terrifies him.



Mummy's boy: Simon and his mother Julie

His mother, he says, has given up hoping he will settle down.

"She can see this is my life, and I'm happy with it. She has her grandchildren, courtesy of my brother Nicholas. Of course she always thought she would talk me round, but in the past few years I think she has realised this is how it is."

Still, all this ex-girlfriend stuff is odd. His most famous ex, Sinitta - of So Macho fame - once gave an interview that should really have severed whatever bond they once had. In it, she claimed that Simon was an emotionally abusive Svengali type.

She painted a picture of a highly dysfunctional relationship, largely devoid of sex.

He smiles, serenely. "Oh people say things. If I thought they really meant them - well, let's just say that Sinitta is genuinely one of the most important people in my life, and always will be.

"My life honestly isn't as weird as people think it is. I work longer hours, maybe I have a bit more money, but fundamentally, I'm not really that different. People think there is something suspect about Terri and me. Why? Just because I don't want to get married?"

I ask if he is in love with her, and his normal eloquence deserts him: "Well, you know, yeah, I mean, yeah, well, I do love Terri, of course. I wouldn't be with someone for five years if I didn't. You couldn't. She is a good person."

But is that the same as being in love with her, Simon?

"You know, I'm probably the last person in the world to talk about that. I'm not very romantic. I can only judge it on what I feel, which is that you have to care about somebody, you have to actually like them, to be with them. I've known people who've said that they are in love with someone, but they don't actually like the person much. It's more that they are obsessed by them."

And so, we finally build up to the gay question. He sees it coming five miles off, and to his credit, laughs about being regarded as effeminate.

"It's probably my mother's influence," he laughs. (She is a former dancer, and he does tend to glide around the room, although you could just put that down to expensive shoes). But no, he says he is not gay.

"If I was, why hide it? It's not as if the music business would be an odd place for a gay man to work. And anyway, if I was trying to hide the fact that I was gay, I would be off playing rugby every Saturday, wouldn't I?"

Hmm. Shame. He would make the perfect gay best friend - although he confesses that he doesn't actually like shopping.

On one level, Simon Cowell is oddly passionless, and not just when he talks about his personal life. He doesn't once make a reference to the music that has made him - quite simply because his rise to the top was never about that.

But what was it about - the money? The success? The doingbetterthan-the-next-guy?

It's probably quite significant that Simon has two brothers, both of whom are millionaires, too, and a father who built up a considerable fortune. Competition was clearly a part of the family make-up.

Sinitta once made a very interesting admission, claiming that her nickname for Simon was "Mummy, Look!" - so intent was he on impressing his beloved mother.

Interestingly, he tells me that he considers himself shy. TV, he says, has given him the ability to walk into a room and be able to bypass the initial small-talk unease.

But during our chat, his eyes flash most when he is talking about the pain he feels when someone - anyone - does better than him. It's what drives him, made him - and it's what he hopes to see in someone else's eyes every Saturday night on The X Factor.

"I don't like the idea that other people in this business might be doing better than me. That really bugs me - I mean really bugs me. It's what drives me on. It's not just about what acts I sign, and how much money I make.

"It's probably unhealthy, but without that drive I don't think you can do this job. If you are happy to see someone who does the same thing as you do well - even someone within your own company - then you haven't got it, simple as that.

"If you look into Madonna's eyes - or Whitney Houston's when she was at her peak - you see something there that other people haven't got. It's a steel, a sense of 'I am going to do it, whatever happens'. It's not necessarily a good character trait to have, but if you are going to make it in this business, you need it."

Ultimately, though, on so many levels Cowell is right out of competitors. He admits that his "curse" - as he puts it - is his own relentless success.

"Every year I want to do better than the last year. Make more, do more, achieve more. It's a killer - but what can you do?"

So there's still a fierce passion there, then, driving the Cowell machine ever further? When I suggest this, he just smiles sweetly, laughs like a drain and reaches for a cigarette.