

By John Earls

VETERAN chart-topper Gabrielle has proved to be one of the biggest stars of the smash ITV contest *The Masked Singer*, but she nearly quit the show, she reveals, before it had even begun. After initially fearing it wouldn't go well, she had a blast before being voted out on Saturday's semi-final, when she was unmasked as Harlequin.

But the singer, whose number one hits in the Nineties include *Dreams* and *Rise*, was so distressed when she first tried on her costume's intricate clown-faced mask that she suffered a panic attack.

She immediately insisted her manager call ITV bosses to tell them she was pulling out. Eventually she was persuaded to carry on and is now delighted she overcame her initial fears. Recalling the dramatic moment she nearly walked away, Gabrielle admitted: "The first time I tried the mask on was so scary. The dress fitting had been fine, but the first day I put the mask on was when I realised I could have a panic attack."

"I couldn't sing in it, I was having constant panic attacks in it. It was just so hot. I said to my manager, 'We're going. Get the lawyers in, because unless they don't have a replacement, I can't do this!'"

Gabrielle, who won two Brit Awards and an Ivor Novello Award for her seven Top 10 hits, admitted that being persuaded to carry on with the show was "like being talked down off a ledge".

The 51-year-old star believes her anxiety might be related to the menopause, saying: "I'm at the age when women get hot, you know what I mean?"

Although she loves the fact a new generation of fans have discovered her, Gabrielle found it hard to perform the show's covers of singers including Rihanna, Tracy Chapman and Harry Styles.

"The panic never left me. I had moments where I calmed down and could control my voice, but there were other times I'd be 'Aargh!', gasping for air. I was obviously trying to hide that, but when I've watched the show back, I hear my vocals and think, 'Oh - there I go!'"

Despite fearing she'd "mess it up" in front of a socially distanced studio audience, Gabrielle went on *The Masked Singer* - competing against, amongst others, Robin, Badger and Sausage, who go through to the final - because, she says, she's become more confident since turning 50 in 2019.

"I always felt like a fraud," she revealed. "I thought so many singers were better than me. But, since turning 50, I've realised I've been doing this for so long that people come to my shows because they want to see me and what I bring."

"I can't do vocal runs like Mariah Carey or Whitney Houston, people just want me to be me. It simply took me years to acknowledge that, and that's a 50 mindset. I'm having fun, I'm still here and I'm living my best life."

GABRIELLE'S optimism hasn't been dented despite contracting Covid last December, three months after filming *The Masked Singer*. The illness is still so fresh in her mind that Gabrielle can recall the exact date she felt unwell, saying: "I did a photoshoot on the Monday and was fine, then on Tuesday, December 15, I felt like I was coming down with flu. By Wednesday, I couldn't raise my head."

"I was bed-bound for a month, I didn't have a Christmas. It was so scary. I had it bad, but I was lucky, because obviously I didn't have it as bad as others."

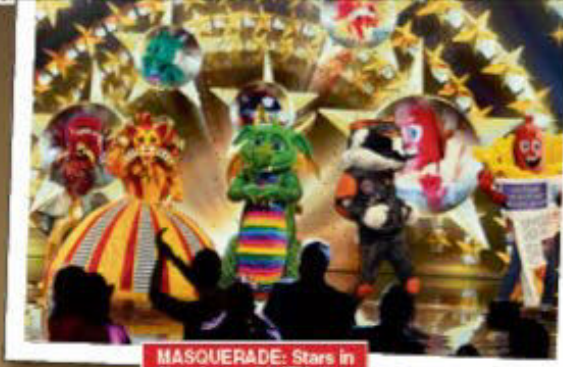
Gabrielle - real name Louisa Gabriella Bobb - only left her house again for the first time last week, saying: "People say you can't get the virus twice, but who knows for definite? I always go out with my mask and I always socially distance, but the virus was so horrible that I'm still scared. But I know this

Dreams can come true ... again

As she's outed as Harlequin on *The Masked Singer*, how the TV show has won the Nineties chart topper a new generation of fans



REVEALED: Performing as Harlequin, left, before being unmasked on Saturday



MASQUERADE: Stars in disguise on hit ITV show *The Masked Singer*

'The first time I tried the mask was so scary. I was having constant panic attacks and couldn't sing'

SECURE IN HER SKIN: Since turning 50, Gabrielle says she has enjoyed new confidence

is a temporary horrible time we're going through. We have to hang on in there and I always try to find the gem in the rubble."

Gabrielle is used to finding the gem in the rubble. She grew up in Brockley, south London, and was born with ptosis, a condition that gives her a lazy eyelid.

When she first found success with *Dreams* in 1993, she wore an eyepatch to hide her eye, and since her 1996 smash *Give Me A Little More Time* has worn her fringe long to disguise it. "I smashed what a singer was supposed to look like," she says.

As a child, Gabrielle was bullied mercilessly over her condition. The mum of two recalled: "Kids laughed at me for wanting to

sing. My school yearbook was full of people saying 'A singer? Yeah, yeah. Hope to see you on *Top Of The Pops* - ha ha.'

"Having a lazy eyelid meant I was a joke to everyone, but I'm glad I had the haters then, because I've been able to show their opinions didn't matter."

Gabrielle says she will always keep her eye covered, feeling that letting people see it would make her feel exposed. But she's happy she's been a role model for children with similar issues.

"I don't show my eyelid, but I've always been open about it," she explains. "When I got letters from mums saying they were pleased I was representing people

with imperfections, that was great, because no one should be marginalised for how they look.

"I wasn't considered the norm in music, because there was a certain standard of beauty for women then. There was no one who looked like me."

Asked if it's easier for women in music now, she cites the treatment of Billie Eilish. Gabrielle's new album *Do It Again* features the covers she performed on *The Masked Singer*, including Eilish's hit *Everything I Wanted*, as well as two new songs.

Gabrielle famed: "The music industry has evolved in some ways, but when I look at how Billie Eilish gets treated, it doesn't feel

like things have changed at all. She usually wears clothes that cover her, and that's amazing.

"But the second Billie wore a slightly tighter top, people were coming for her, saying 'She's obscene after all'."

"It's like we've gone back even further, because somehow an incredibly talented 19-year-old woman is getting

body-shamed and losing followers, when there's no way a guy would get anyone coming for the way he looks."

Gabrielle is reluctant to share any details about her partner, but reveals her new single *Stop Right Now* was written after they hit a sticky patch. She said: "It's a relationship that was worth saving. It's a personal song, about being madly in love and then it goes a bit 'Hmm, this isn't going right'." Rather than thinking it should end straight away, it was "Let's take a breather".

"When you're in love when you're older, you appreciate it more. You don't try to lose yourself so much. When you become more confident, you don't always look to your other half to make you feel whole."

"Love is just as passionate, but you think 'Honey, I can't do without you - but if you go, it's not going to be the end of my world.'" It's unsurprising the star is protective of her personal life. She was devastated when her ex-boyfriend Tony Antoniou was convicted in 1997 of killing his stepfather.

THE COUPLE had separated three years earlier, when Gabrielle was pregnant with their son Jordan, now a successful music industry talent scout, but her name was linked with the distressing case. The trauma inspired her third album *Rise* in 1999, which she will tour in November. Gabrielle recalled: "My heartache was so intense that writing those songs was like an exorcism. As scary as that sounds, those songs just had to come out of me."

"Writing songs was my therapy. But, 22 years later, it's beautiful and calming to sing them, because people tell me how much those songs mean to them."

"They've become other people's therapy now. I can sing them with a different head on, and that's a great place to be, even if it hasn't come overnight."

Now that she is living her best life, Gabrielle can enjoy guessing who the other contestants are on *The Masked Singer*, along with the rest of the viewers and celebrity judges Davina McCall, Jonathan Ross, Rita Ora and Mo'Nique.

She insists the show is filmed in such secrecy that she has no idea who Badger, Seussage and the other finalist Robin are, laughing: "How the hell didn't I know Mel B was on, when I was right next to her?"

"It's lovely that people were guessing it was me. Even though I tried to disguise my voice, I was trending on Twitter, and that's hilarious for an older woman like me."

"Doing that show and having so much fun after my tour had been cancelled, that's how I try to live my life now. You know that phrase 'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade'? Forget that. I want to make champagne, darling!"

● Gabrielle's new single *Stop Right Now* is out now on BMG. Her new album, *Do It Again*, is released on March 5 and her *Rise Again UK tour* runs from November 4 to 26. See www.gabrielle.co.uk for details