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### 'ENDERS EXCLUSIVE

Rita Simons on being the last Mitchell woman standing

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11 - 17 JUNE 2011

EastEnders  
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# FLYING THE FLAG FOR THE MITCHELLS

Peggy's long gone, twisted Glenda has been run out of Walford and troubled Ronnie is about to make her exit. Actress **Rita Simons** tells *buzz* how it feels to be the last Mitchell woman standing in Albert Square

**T**O HEAR EASTENDERS star Rita Simons speak, you would think there had been a death in the family. Ever since her on-screen sister and off-screen best mate Samantha Womack shot her final scenes as baby-swapping businesswoman Ronnie Mitchell, Rita has gone into work each day still in denial that another one of the famous Mitchell dynasty has gone.

"I've actually moved into Sam's dressing room since she left," the 34-year-old reveals with a thin smile. "But every day when I arrive, I accidentally start walking to my old dressing room before realising I don't live there any more. Then I go up to Sam's room thinking that she's going to be there and she isn't."

"That's what we always used to do. Whoever arrived at the EastEnders studios last would stop off to see the other one. But that doesn't happen any more and it feels very, very weird. Sam's gone and it has ripped my heart out. It may sound strange, but it really does feel like a family member has died."

Yes, but 'family' is key to who the Mitchells are. Both on and off screen, they're so fiercely – and sweetly – loyal to each other that they really are like an East End version of *The Godfather*.

"Everyone else takes the mickey out of it," says Rita, aka Roxy Mitchell, sitting in *buzz*'s photo studio hugging the specially-embroidered 'Team Mitchell' military shirt that we have

WORDS  
PAUL SIMPER  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
MARK BOND



“Sam gave me a locket on her last day with R&R Forever on the back. I burst out crying.”

started so dramatically with the cot-death of her baby James and had the country up in arms as Ronnie swapped her dead son for Kat Moon's healthy baby Tommy on New Year's Eve.

Rita lets out a heartfelt sigh as she recalls filming Sam's last episode. “There were tears all day,” she says. “In typical TV fashion we didn't shoot in order, so our actual final goodbye scene that viewers will see was shot in the morning. But it was really hard.”

“I bought Sam a silver locket with a little message on the back. I can't say what the message is because it's actually something that we say to each other in our farewell scene. But when Sam found out I'd bought her one, she did the same. The one she gave to me says 'R&R Forever' on the back. I gave Sam her locket during her final week so we wouldn't have tears at the end, but when I came into work that last morning she presented me with mine and I burst out crying.”

Appropriately for a family that loves a tear-up, their last scene together was a massive row. “It was really hard because with every take we did, we knew we were getting closer and closer to the last one we'd ever shoot together, at least for the foreseeable future,” Rita says.

It may seem like only yesterday, but the battling/weeping/carousing sister act that was Ronnie and Roxy Mitchell first kicked off four years ago – heralded by headlines such as ‘The Bitch-ell Sisters’ – as the pair strutted into The Queen Vic, leaving an indelible impression on viewers and the menfolk of Walford alike.

Rita, who at that time was a young married mum with 15-month-old twins Jaimee and Maiya, had finally decided to make acting her priority after failing to make it as a pop star in groups including Tantrum (with Blue's Duncan James and Ziggy from Big Brother), Girls@Play, Charli, and The Electric Dolls.

“We lived opposite the EastEnders studio in Elstree, Hertfordshire, at the time and I said to my husband Theo: ‘Why can't I get a job over there?’

“I remember the brief I was given for Roxy – it was that she was glamorous and a bit of a princess, so I dressed completely the opposite because I knew that all the other girls auditioning would be dolled up to the nines.”

She immediately spotted her future co-star Sam. “She had been gardening and had mud under her fingernails,” Rita laughs. “That's so Sam. She had flip-flops on. But we looked quite similar. If you looked round the rest of the room it was girls with boobs under their chins, knee-high boots and hairspray and then there was us just sat in the corner learning our scripts.”

Of course, this being soapland, the actresses have had plenty of drama both in front of and away from the cameras ever since. It was Roxy who torpedoed Ronnie's relationship with the love of her life, Jack Branning, when she

so happy for me. He said: ‘Any win for you is a win for the Mitchells.’”

### TEARFUL FAREWELL

It's that behind-the-scenes camaraderie that makes Sam's departure all the more difficult to come to terms with. Viewers will see Sam and Rita's final scenes together as Ronnie and Roxy early next month. The soap finally reaches the conclusion of Ronnie's baby-swap plot, which

given her to wear for our exclusive shoot. “But what makes the Mitchells special is the fact that it's all about family. I haven't heard any of the other families in EastEnders talk about that the way the Mitchells do.

“And it's like that in real life as well. When I won the Most Popular Newcomer prize at the National Television Awards back in 2008, Steve McFadden [who plays Roxy's crackhead hard-man and occasional mechanic cousin Phil] was



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Rita and best pal Sam Womack in EastEnders; with husband Theo and five-year-old twin daughters Jaimee and Maiya; and in girl band Girls@Play (centre) back in 2001

had a drunken one-night stand with him.

And off screen, Rita has been there for Sam, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her during the fallout from the baby-swap controversy.

Recalling the last few months, Rita says: “I told Sam: ‘Whatever you say about it, whether I think it's right or wrong, I will agree with you and stand by you because you're my mate.’ I just stood by my friend who was going through a really hard time.”

Rita's blue eyes blaze defiantly, as she heads off the inevitable next question.

“So whatever my opinion on all of that actually is, it's irrelevant. But Sam's been through a lot. Whether she just needs a break [from the show] or whether it needs to be permanent, who knows? But she definitely needs to not have to cry every day as Ronnie, as she has been doing.”

### IT'S ALL ABOUT FAMILY

There's no doubt that working 14-hour days on a soap and being a mum can take a bit of juggling – however healthy the pay packet – and Rita remembers what a struggle it was for her when she started.

“My daughters were 15 months old then and they were just at the point where they would stand in the doorway and try to block me from going to work,” she remembers. “Then when they got a bit older they'd say: ‘Mummy, don't go’ and cry. I would just have to leave them crying. It was really, really hard.”

Has she been able to give any advice to Sam with her kids, Benjamin, ten, and Lily-Rose, six? Rita roars with laughter. “Sam won't listen to

any advice,” she says. “Ever. You can't tell Sam anything. You could tell her that the sky is blue but she wouldn't believe you.”

“Sam has to work everything out for herself. But you can plant seeds in her head and let them grow, and that's what I do with her.

“Whatever she says, though, I think she balances her family life and work amazingly. She may say she doesn't but she gets things done with those kids that I can't imagine. She does arts and crafts with them, she takes them somewhere fabulous every weekend. Picnics, parties for all of their friends, sleepovers – and she cooks. She's got it balanced. She just doesn't realise she has.”

Rita's got some life balancing of her own to do. The last time we bumped into her, the previous week, she was at a charity ball to raise money for Great Ormond Street Hospital at London's swanky Dorchester hotel. There was plenty of champagne on offer and although *buzz* left before it got too messy, she admits that her night ended spectacularly – pole-dancing with three members of Blue in a Soho nightclub bar until the very early hours.

“I hooked up with Duncan [James], Antony [Costa] and Lee [Ryan],” she says. “They were really excited to see me because we go right back to the days when I was in Tantrum with Duncan. They are like three brothers to me.

“So we danced all night long. I came out of the club with soaking wet hair and got home at 5am. But Antony, bless him, got us a cab and made sure it took me home first. He wouldn't let me pay, he saw me to my door and then he took the cab on. It was really sweet. And no, he didn't wee on any cashpoints on the way!”

However, the hangover was something else. “That was the first time I'd been drunk in months and months,” she explains. “And I know why I don't do it any more, because I hate it the next day. I felt so bad I had to go to McDonald's for the first time in 15 years, get a Quarter Pounder and go straight back to bed.”

It is, of course, the sort of behaviour that makes for classic Roxy Mitchell. So now, with Rita as the only woman left still flying the flag for the Mitchells, can we expect a lot more outrageous behaviour – especially now she's got involved with the twisted Michael Moon?

She nods furiously. “I want problems and proper fighting,” she says, relishing the storyline with Mr Moon, which is about to get a whole lot darker.

“I'd like her to have a long relationship with Michael. I like it when Roxy's feisty but not just in a ‘let's get drunk with Christian and roll around in the street’ kind of way. I like it when she has a fight that has some depth. There is great potential with her and Michael. You can see it now – the Mitchells versus the Moons.”

When two tribes go to war... it looks like the Mitchells have found a new warrior queen.

WATCH IT: EASTENDERS MON, TUES, THURS & FRI TIMES VARY BBC1

## HIRED OR FIRED?

As well as being rampaging Roxy, Rita is also the niece of The Apprentice head honcho Lord Alan Sugar.

### WHAT BUSINESS SKILLS DO YOU HAVE?

I worked as a PA in a nightclub called Eve on Regent Street in London's West End for years. That paid my bills when I was singing. So I'm pretty good at selling and promoting. I also did telesales. I can talk the hind legs off a donkey.

### WHO ARE YOU BACKING IN THE APPRENTICE?

I think the Northern Irish guy Jim [below] is great. He's about the only one I rate this series. He doesn't schmooze like the others do when negotiating a deal. The others make you cringe with their negotiations. But I'd give Jim money off whatever I was selling him. He's a charmer.



### WHO'S THE MOST ANNOYING CANDIDATE EVER?

Stuart Baggs [below] from last year. Hardcore businessman Claude Littner, who interviews the final five contestants, is a family friend. Baggs told him he was a big fish in a little pond. Claude said: “You're not even a fish.” I loved that.



### WHAT TASK WOULD YOU BE RUBBISH AT?

Anything involving numbers. I can sell but I'd be rubbish at working out profit and loss unless I had a calculator.

### IF STUART BAGGS IS 'THE BRAND', WHAT WOULD RITA SIMONS BE?

The Band. I'd be the entertainment.

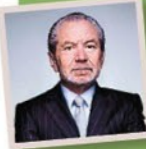
### MARGARET MOUNTFORD OR KAREN BRADY?

I have to say Margaret [below]. She was the first. She's just Margaret, she's the original bad girl. I've never met her but I know Nick Hewer, who is very funny.



### DID YOU EVER CONSIDER WORKING FOR UNCLE ALAN?

No. I always wanted to be a singer or an actress. But when I was off school when I was a kid, my dad used to take me to work sometimes. I'd sit under his desk at the Amstrad offices in Essex. I'd go into this big room filled with computers and play on the games that were there to be tested.



### HAS LORD SUGAR (LEFT) EVER BEEN TO ALBERT SQUARE?

No, he hasn't, but I would like to show him round the Square. He likes EastEnders.

Stylist: Isobel Drummond. Hair and make-up: Simone Volmer. Shorts, boots and belt: New Look. Shirt: H&M. Hat and tie: stylist's own. Jacket: www.surplus.co.uk. Jewellery: Freedom at Topshop. Pictures: Rex.