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Stacey: The TV Queen Of Our Hearts!



Stacey Solomon believes her two-year-old son Zach is all that's good in the world. Well, that's how we feel about our Stace. **buzz** celebrates the rise of the Queen of the Jungle

Dressed in vintage 1940s clothes, sipping her Coke through a straw so as not to mess up her scarlet lippy, Stacey Solomon is contemplating the fact that **buzz** is breaking out the bunting and proclaiming her The Nation's Sweetheart (yes, it's time to hand over that crown, Cheryl). "I certainly don't feel like it," reveals Stacey. "I don't wake up each day and see a sign on my wall saying: 'The Nation's Sweetheart.'" Ask her what she'd call herself and her eyes will pop, her hands will flap and she will opt for 'annoying' or 'loot'. But we're having none of it because beneath all the goofiness beats the heart of a hard-working, 21-year-old single mum who's just making the best of herself and enjoying every amazing thing that's happened to her in the past 18 months, from finishing third in The X Factor in 2009 to becoming I'm A Celebrity's Queen of the Jungle.

It's easy to imagine that, like many an overnight reality-TV success, Stacey just fell out of bed one day, sang a couple of numbers in front of Simon Cowell, Louis Walsh, Cheryl Cole and Dannii Minogue and hey presto – she was sorted for life. In actual fact, Stacey passed 13 GCSEs, worked two jobs (including a three-year-stint in a chip shop) to put herself through college and finished her diploma in dance, drama and performing arts at Havering College in Essex just days before she reached The X Factor final 12. Her civil servant mum Fiona and wedding photographer dad David drummed into her the importance of education and she's never taken anything for granted. "People asked me why I was doing I'm A Celebrity only a year after The X Factor," she says, chomping on chicken, spuds and rice before her **buzz** shoot. "But I don't want to feel I'm too good for anything because I'm not. How do I know that a year from now people will want to see me do anything ever again?"

"When I kept getting through to the next stage of X Factor I didn't think any more of it. I just kept on going to college. Coming from Dagenham, I can't stress to you enough how nothing like that ever happens to people like us. No one I grew up with or went to college with knew anyone famous." She remembers being briefed with her fellow contestants, including Olly Murs, Joe McElderry and Jedward, before meeting X Factor's mega-showbiz mentors including Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston. "What they do is make you wait outside a room and say: 'Right, you're about to meet so and so – really think about what you're going to say.' I was like: 'What the hell? I've never thought about what I'm going to say in my life! You've never met anyone and then you're about to meet some of the most inaccessible stars in the whole world.' "I used to think these shows were fixed and that no-one real ever gets into one of them. And then there I was."



But Stacey had already dealt with a far bigger bombshell in her life than meeting the odd (OK, a few very odd) megastars. Four months into her diploma at college she became pregnant aged 17 by her boyfriend Dean Cox, 26, who is from Romford. By the time their son Zach, who's three this March, was born, she and Dean had split up.

"When I got pregnant I thought my life was over," she admits. "I think every mum who gives birth goes through that - this is it, goodbye life. I just thought I'll never be able to do anything that I wanted to do. It took me three months after Zach was born to get over that."

"Then I thought: 'Hold on. When I was a kid my mum and dad [who later separated] were both out working. If me and my brother Matthew and sister Jemma weren't at nursery, we were with a childminder or a nan. So what's the difference? I love my mum and dad just as much as if they'd been at home with us all the time."

"So I rang up the college and asked what my options were. I asked everyone around me: 'What can I do? How can I get back to college?' And it turned out that if I worked in the evenings as a barmaid, I could pay for Zach to go to nursery while I was at college, and by the time my mum got back from work I'd already have finished and be able to take him home."

"I think that when I gave birth to Zach, he was a miracle in disguise. I look back and think 'Who has been there at the centre of everything good that's ever happened to me?' It's him. When I look at him I think: 'Oh my God, that's my creation of Good.'"

Stacey's always said she just wants to give Zach the best life possible, but she doesn't see why that should mean moving away from her roots.

"People say you should put him in private school



Clockwise from top left: With boyfriend Aaron and her son Zach; Stacey became a true jungle VIP in last year's *I'm A Celebrity*; and the singer rounded off 2010 presenting an award to bomb disposal expert Karl Ley at the Millies

but I don't know. He's at my old nursery at the moment and then he'll enrol in the primary school I went to next September. I know I wouldn't want to go to private school. I loved my schools. I went to King Solomon High School in Barking and had a good social life and the teachers were great. If a kid wants to learn, a kid wants to learn."

LOVE AND WAR

There's also been romance for Stacey. She was thrilled when her boyfriend Aaron Barham, 23, was waiting on the other side of the rope bridge to greet her when she came out of the jungle in December. The two of them are thinking about buying their own home when she finds the time.

"I can't wait for my own house," she says. "If Aaron lives with me, he'll have to get used to it being the girliest, happiest house ever. He's really funny because he's the complete opposite to me. He likes comedians who don't smile, like Jimmy Carr, and cool music."

She says she drives him mad sometimes, but it's all in typical Stacey good spirits.

"I tell people he's a painter," she says. "They say: 'Ooh, what does he paint?' They think he's an artist. I say: 'Walls!'"

But painters and decorators are in, thanks to Matt Cardle, Stace.

"They are, aren't they?" she says, not stopping for breath. "But Aaron can't wear a cap like Matt

because he's got a square head! It's exciting being in a relationship, though. It's nice."

The *buzz* shoot is in full swing. Stacey loves her vintage look, and kicks her legs in the air uncomplainingly for the ninth time while a soundtrack of swing favourites by Michael Bublé, Bette Midler and Barbra Streisand makes her think of the 1940s when forces sweethearts were all the rage.

She then starts talking about what a special time she had at The Sun's Millies ceremony last month, when she presented the award for Most Outstanding Soldier to Warrant Officer 2 Karl Ley, 29, who defused 139 roadside bombs during a six-month tour of duty in Afghanistan.

"He told me it was so nice to meet me. I said: 'You what?! It's so nice to meet you - you're the one who's disassembled all these bombs.' I felt like I was surrounded by the nicest people in the country. I'd love to go out to Afghanistan and visit our troops. That would be so good. I've thought that ever since I sang *At Last* with the RAF Squadronaires last year."

THE FUTURE'S BRIGHT

It's only January but already Stace is bursting with plans for 2011. She's hoping *I'm A Celebrity* will pick up Best Entertainment Programme at next week's National Television Awards, and she's got her own ideas about what her dream TV job would be.

"When I saw Holly Willoughby presenting *The Xtra Factor* the year I was on the show, I thought that was such a cool job. I'd love to do that."

She'd also love to make a record with Professor Green or Lily Allen (they could do a cover of Lily's *Oh My God*, called *Oh My Cod* - in tribute to her old chippy - but she hasn't got a deal yet) and, despite not being impressed by new pal Dom Joly's talk of autobiographies, she's all set to have one of her own.

"I can't call it an autobiography because I've only been on this planet for about two minutes," she says. "It's just the story so far. I just want to write down everything that I've done and then people can see it - if they want to. And if I get forgetful when I get older I can simply pop into WH Smith and read my book and I'll remember."

Has she got any advice for the latest batch of *X Factor* stars such as Rebecca Ferguson and Cher Lloyd who, after next month's nationwide tour, will be finding out, as Stace did, what it's like when you don't win the show?

"My advice would be for them to work really hard, get as much experience as possible and make as much money as they can - but be a good person and be nice."

Spoken like a true Nation's Sweetheart.

Vote online for the National TV Awards at www.nationaltvawards.com. Voting ends at midday on Wednesday 26 January.

WATCH IT! THE NATIONAL TV AWARDS WEDNESDAY 26 JANUARY 8PM ITV1

Stacey: Sharon Appleby; Hair: Nanahe; Hat: Hordid; and shoes: New Look; Bracelet and earrings: Mique; Page 14-15: Clothes; belt and shoes: New Look; Hair coverage: Freedom; at Topshop; Pictures: Ben Features.



WHAT'S NOT TO LOVE ABOUT OUR STAGE?

- 1. SHE CAN EVEN SEE THE GOOD IN GILLIAN MCKEITH**

"I've got nothing bad to say about her. We didn't see what you saw at home. All I saw was a woman crying, getting skinnier and fainting."
- 2. HER FAVE MEAL IS SAVELOY AND CHIPS.**

"When you're not eating any of the food you get at home and you're told you can have any meal in the world, you're going to have saveley and chips. That's the only thing I've eaten religiously every Friday since I was little."
- 3. SHE'S FLYING THE BANNER FOR SINGLE MUMS.**

"I'm no different to any other working single mum. Whether you're singing or doing a nine-to-five job, you're all in the same boat."
- 4. SHE OUT-ARGUED DOM JOLY ON THE MERITS OF CELEB MAGS.**

"You can't say that books are better reading than celebrity magazines. People like Dom have got their autobiographies, but what's the difference between that and being interviewed by *The Sun*? It's still your life."
- 5. SHE DIDN'T BURST INTO SONG IN THE JUNGLE.**

"I honestly did it for the experience. I wasn't there to promote anything."
- 6. SHE'D RATHER BE A PRINCESS THAN A WAG.**

"The WAG life isn't so fun, is it? You just get dumped and cheated on. I wanted to be a princess when I was little. You get the castle, the horse, the prince - and the gold."
- 7. SHE DOESN'T WANT A FANCY LONDON PAD.**

"Essex is much better. For the price of a one-bedroom flat in London you could get a five-bedroom house in Essex with land, horses and rainbows thrown in."