

ERASURE'S ANDY BELL ROCKS ON DESPITE SUFFERING ILLNESS, DRUG ADDICTION AND MAJOR SURGERY

THINKING POSITIVE
Andy's good spirit

Erasure singer Andy Bell is dressed in trainers and sweat pants, ready to go off to the gym after a day of dress rehearsals for Erasure's latest tour. The show will have a Bollywood Elvis theme, with extravagant costumes designed by Bell himself.

"I just had the idea to do something Elvis last summer," smiles Andy. "I didn't even realise it was going to be his 70th birthday. I wonder what he'd think of it?"

A camp, openly gay singer – who has recently announced his HIV status – may not seem to have much in common with the king of rock 'n' roll, but Andy, 40, is a survivor who has battled the odds and won.

Despite a recent double hip replacement operation, he's the last person to start singing a song of woe. "Having the operation was a great relief to be honest," he says. "I feel so much better and more capable. Before I was in agony."

The operation became necessary after drugs Bell was taking to counter a bout of pneumonia caused blood to dry in his thighs. It was during the intensive recovery from his operation that Andy decided to go public about his HIV status.

"I was in a nursing home and there were a lot of different courses you could take," he says. "I did something called rebirthing which was a very emotional experience. All these feelings came rushing to the surface. I'd never been baptised but it felt something like that."

His HIV diagnosis in June 1998 had not come as a surprise to Andy. "My partner Paul had already been diagnosed. Also, quite a few of our friends had been HIV and died. I knew the signs – I'd had really bad haemorrhoids and thrush in the throat for a long time."

"I must admit that part of me still likes to shock. My mother is a lovely person but she has a drink problem. I tried to shock her out of drinking by telling her I was HIV, but I realise now that was wrong. She'll stop when the time is right."

"But my parents always have been supportive. My father had to put up with a lot of stick in the factory where he works when I became known as a gay pop star."

In one interview, Andy even said he had wanted to become HIV positive. "It's true," he admits. "I did say that, but I didn't really mean it. What I meant was that I

wanted to feel what so many others were feeling. So many of our friends died. We knew a Turkish guy whose partner died and he couldn't handle it and he killed himself. I always felt guilty that we weren't able to do more to help him."

Bell is in amazingly good spirits considering his recent past, which has also included recovery from cocaine addiction and nursing Paul, his partner for 20 years, through a series of strokes.

"He's been amazing," says Andy. "At first we were really worried because he had his stroke in Los Angeles and he had no medical insurance in the US. But we got him back home and, for a while, he was taking his medicine and food through a drip, but he's much better now."

Andy describes his relationship with Paul as open. "He isn't so much into that side of things as I am," he says, "but he's older so he's done everything. Sometimes when we're on tour, Paul will come out but we have to choose the places with care. If we were cooped up in a hotel room for too long we'd get on each other's nerves."

One thing they did help each other conquer was their cocaine habit.

"I really try to warn people about cocaine," says Andy. "I got into it for about five years. You start with a few lines, have a few more and eventually you don't go out. All you want is to stay in with the drug. It ruins lives."

With regular visits to Narcotics Anonymous and a new tour, which he insists will be the highlight of Erasure's 25 million-selling career, Bell is welcoming the future with open arms. How does he account for his resilience?

"Being bullied at school from the ages of nine to 13," he states. "I was beaten up constantly. I practised turning the other cheek. I know bullying can drive some people down but I rose above it. I never held any resentment against the bullies. That would just be a waste of time and energy."

● For UK tour details, see www.erasureinfo.com.

I tried to shock my mum out of drinking by telling her I was HIV

**BEST GIGS:
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NEW TOUR: Andy (left) with Vince

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ALL SHOOK UP