

FAREWELLE MCFEAST!

As I watch Libbi Gorr crossing the road to meet me for this interview, I'm struck by how little she's changed since the first time I met her, back in the mid 80s when she'd just created her alter-ego Elle McFeast, for a radio sports program.

She looks fresh and bubbly, not bad considering the lateness of the previous evening, spent hosting a hotel party for friends and family, to celebrate her parents' 46th wedding anniversary.

She's almost reached me, but en route she encounters newlyweds about to be photographed. She pauses to watch, and I half expect her to start singing "It Should Have Been Me" at the top of her voice. But that's something Elle McFeast would do, and today it's all about Libbi.

Indeed from now on, it will be all about Libbi Gorr. Elle McFeast, the alter ego Gorr created in 1986 as "the original Melbourne Aussie Rules footy chick", is hanging up her footy boots.

Elle's final TV special, *Sex Cells* will screen nationally later this year and then Elle will slip quietly into oblivion.

"Elle was a full-time commitment," says Gorr. "I spent every day in character for years. It's important for me to actually close that door and work on Libbi Gorr. I needed to make that decision – do I want to be trapped inside a television forever? I can't tell you how good it feels having made the decision. It's time.

"I'm proud that I created Elle McFeast, and she's certainly a part of my personality, but there's more."

There are those who would say that the demise of Elle McFeast began as far back as 1998, when her controversial interview with convicted murdered Chopper Read turned into the most talked-about TV moment of the year. Certainly, Gorr remembers 1998 as "the year my confidence broke".

Read was drunk and made tasteless jokes about his victims. The controversy that followed was a frenzy of condemnation and at the time Gorr likened the incident to breaking a leg. "It was shock and I screamed. I was frightened – live television bit me".

But three years on, she scoffs at any suggestion that singular incident became the catalyst for shutting down Elle McFeast.

"It was an amazing experience for a young woman to go through," Gorr says. "I wish I could say it was water off a duck's back at the time, I wish I could say that. The aftermath was so difficult to cope with, and it affected my confidence.

"I had always felt the camera was my friend and I was very comfortable being on television. But towards the end of the second 16-week block of *McFeast Live*, I looked at the cameras and I didn't feel ... comfortable any more. I didn't feel the joy. Ultimately, it was probably a good thing. It forced me to step back and reassess what I was doing and why I was doing it."

But no, she says convincingly, that incident alone didn't trigger her decision to put Elle to rest.

"When you look around at people who've had longevity in television, they've all had their 'moments'," she says. "It's a question not so much of what happens, but how you handle it.

"I'd been Elle McFeast by that stage, nearly every day since 1991. Seven years living inside a television. My friends, my life, everything revolved around Elle McFeast, people treated me as Elle McFeast. I possibly was going through some sort of belated adolescence and it was time to grow."

Since that momentous decision was made, Gorr has posed for an Archibald portrait and returned to the stage in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. She is currently writing a movie. At 36, Libbi Gorr has started to grow.

LISBETH JOANNE Gorr was born in Melbourne in March 1965, the youngest of three children and only daughter of Eric and Beverley. A motor mechanic and racing car driver, Eric ran his own business, Gorr Automotive. Brother Jon, 46, is a part time lawyer and runs a B&B and a pickle farm while David, 39, is a radio announcer.

"My eldest brother is very smart, one of the smartest and best read people I've ever known," Gorr says, "and David just makes me laugh. He's very funny, and very naughty."

Gorr is not sure which side of the family her showbiz leanings come from. Her mother was an actress who was awarded a drama scholarship, but Gorr's grandfather felt she needed "a proper job" to fall back on, so Beverley followed her mother into Pharmacy.

Gorr's father Eric - the son of Shepparton farmers - has spent a lifetime telling stories and still visits older people to tell them Australian bush yarns. "Thomas E. Spencer's *How McDougall Topped the Score* is a big favorite," Gorr says. "Dad loves to sing, too. We sang our way through *Riding Through The Dandenong Ranges* on the back porch on many occasions."

Growing up in Melbourne, firstly in middle class Murrumbeena and later in Belgrave, in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges, Gorr went to Korowa Girls School and MLC. "Dad picked me up occasionally from Korowa on a motorbike," Gorr recalls. "He only told me recently that Miss Barnfather, the headmistress, had said to him, 'Mr Gorr, I don't think it's very lady-like for Libbi to be cocking her leg over the back of a Harley in her school uniform', so that was the end of that. I was a tomboy, with a big fantasy life. Conventional roles weren't necessarily imposed on us."

Gorr was grateful for a single-sex school, so self-conscious was she in those teen years of being plain. "If I'd had to compete with boys, I'd never have gone anywhere," she says. "Beauty and girliness was not a currency I

competed in. I was insecure about my looks and I'd never have done anything if I thought the boys were watching.

"My best friend Jo was the beautiful girl, she was the one who wore the Olivia Newton-John pants at dancing class, and I was the chubby, dark-haired one who stood back and hoped that anyone would ask me to dance."

No-one was filling Gorr's dance card, but her report cards were good. She favoured humanities, politics and drama and gravitated to the peer group that liked to have fun but still pass exams. Mid-teens, she aspired to a career in journalism, which she saw as an interesting mixture of acting and politics. "I just loved Jana Wendt," she says of her future ABC colleague. "She was the first person to walk through that door who showed there were other options for girls on television, aside from weather girl or barrel girl."

Her schooling complete, Gorr was offered a cadetship with the Herald & Weekly Times but passed on it because she wasn't ready to make a career choice. Instead, she bought time by enrolling at Melbourne University. "In those days, the government system supported tertiary education and it was easy to get an education without having to think of the financial consequences. I did a law degree at Melbourne Uni, not because it was a desire, more that it was an opportunity.

"We're a Melbourne Jewish family. None of us were good at medicine, unless we were taking it."

Gorr did well at law, but the performer in her was drawn to the annual Uni revues, in which she appeared with a bevy of fellow future TV stars. *The Panel's* Tom Gleisner produced her in the 1984 law revue *Screw Loose*, which also starred Costas Kiliadis and Magda Szubanski.

"I just loved being involved in the revues," Gorr says. "It gave me a reason to be at University because, quite frankly, Constitutional Law just wasn't tripping my trigger."

Still, Lisbeth Gorr B.A., L.L.B. graduated Melbourne University a Bachelor of Arts and Law and spent "one recalcitrant year" at the law firm Phillips Fox, where she did her articles. The highlight of her year was when she and another article clerk were asked to organise the Christmas party, an event that went on to become legend within the firm. "We put together a band and I sang backup vocals. It was such a hoot."

Now bitten by the performance bug, Gorr joined the all-girl social satire singing group the Hot Bagels in 1986 and after entering a radio competition under fake names, the group won a trip to Great Keppel Island for creating 3XY's breakfast show signature theme.

At the time, the Hot Bagels were managed by former Skyhooks bass player Greg Macainsh, who quit when Gorr joined. A mere coincidence, he maintains. "I knew I would be constantly distracted in the most pleasurable way," Macainsh says. "Besides, she's unmanageable! But I wouldn't have her any other way." (Nanette Fox, Gorr's agent ever since, claims working with Gorr is never dull. "It's like being in an episode of *M*A*S*H*", she says, "one minute we're sipping Martinis and playing practical jokes on the industry, then

the siren sounds and they're bringing in the wounded". The hardest part of the job, Fox believes, is getting her client to keep her clothes on during photo shoots.)

Gorr was invited to join the on-air line-up for the station's new football panel program, *Kick To Kick* and it was for this show that Elle McFeast was created.

"She was an exaggeration of me, with a great big dollop of fantasy," Gorr says. "I made Elle the original Melbourne Aussie Rules footy chick. It was a way of getting to meet my heroes, and play with them in a way that I couldn't on the football field.

"I looked Libbi up in the name dictionary. It means "wallflower". Elle was Australian colloquial for long and leggy with a great set of tits. I said 'that'll do!'. Elle McPherson was on the front cover of *Sports Illustrated* at the time. I was a Hot Bagel, eating junk food on my way home from gigs at the Prince Patrick. It worked for me."

Kick To Kick moved to a new radio station and Gorr went with it. For a time, she also wrote comedy with Mick Molloy for the station's breakfast program but working "behind the scenes" was frustrating for a girl now ready to be a star.

Her moment came in 1992 when Gorr was offered her own weekend breakfast shift on the top-rating FOX FM – *The Morning After* - starring with her brother David in a unique sibling pairing that won the pair a radio award. "We were chuffed", says Gorr.

Brother Dave remembers "a great working relationship, stemming from a wonderful childhood and later, writing together on the long train-ride to school". He saw the show as a perfect mixture of brawn and brain. "Lib could lift heavy things, I could work well under pressure."

Before the year was out, Andrew Denton offered Elle a shot at national television, as Melbourne correspondent on the ABC's *Live And Sweaty*. By 1993, she had taken over as host.

Her stint was followed by a series of ABC specials including *Sex Guys and Videotape* (a gold medal winner at the New York Festival of Television), *The Whitlam Dismissal* and *Breasts*, and in 1995 the network gave Elle her own variety series, *McFeast*.

Gorr had created a monster. By 1996, Elle McFeast was one of Aunty's biggest national stars and in 1998, her series of top-rating specials led her to another series, *McFeast Live*.

This was largely freeform television, with Gorr calling on the wit and intuition she'd acquired when she was Plain Jane at MLC. It all went swimmingly until the "Chopper incident".

"What a night that was," Gorr muses, sinking back in her chair, arms akimbo. "What a year that was! Jesus! But what a fabulous experience. The ABC was going through turmoil at the time. I think the Chopper Read interview was a convenient handle for the ABC to hang it on."

Gorr's close friend Bradley Grieve, author of the best-seller *The Blue Day Book*, believes Gorr, quite wrongly, felt she had let people down and found it difficult to move on from the incident.

"Live performance is an untamable shrew on steroids," Grieve says. "Lib was superb in her role and, had she been given a bit more support from some of the ABC weasel factions, I believe she would have gone on to produce yet another hit show."

That support was not forthcoming. The ABC pulled the plug on *McFeast Live* and blithely announced that Gorr would make a series of specials in the future.

Bruised but not broken, Gorr dropped from sight. She headed for Texas where her Elle McFeast special *Women In Uniform* had been selected for the INPUT Festival in Dallas.

"I loved Texas," Gorr says. "While I was there, the ABC threw in some development money to make a pilot for a show we were going to call *Romp Around The World*. We drove around Texas in a bloody ute with two *Race Around The World* cameras and picked up people along the way to help, and we made a pilot."

Half way through, the financing was pulled following yet another change of management at the ABC. Undaunted, Gorr took the footage to Ten, who commissioned two international pilots and before long, Gorr was in London, where she made *The Queen And I* and *Sex Cells*.

"It was a wonderful experience," Gorr says. "Commercial television. Organising everything, raising the money ourselves, putting it together, putting ourselves on the line."

The other half of "ourselves" is former ABC chief, David Hill. Gorr had figured that to have a voice and make the programs she wanted to make, she needed a production company like Working Dog, which enables the creative people to run their own business. She wanted a business head with a sense of adventure, and Hill was her only choice. "David had always been a great supporter and a fun bloke," Gorr says. "I liked his sense of adventure. He thought it would be a bit of a lark too, so we set up Gorr Hill." (A delicious irony for Gorr, given that the head offices of the ABC, which had so recently sidelined her, are located in Gore Hill, in Sydney's north).

David Hill needed no convincing. Gorr, he says, is "a thoroughly decent human being". He admired her creativity enough to come on board. "She made me an offer I couldn't refuse and she's such a pleasure to work with."

The retirement of Elle McFeast was now a fait accompli. Pleased as he is to see Gorr happy, Bradley Grieve admits some sadness at waving Elle goodbye. "Elle has been a wonderful ambassador," Grieve says. "I hope Libbi knows what a tremendous contribution she made to so many people, especially women."

Indeed, McFeast's work, especially her special *Breasts*, set a benchmark for television that makes a difference. Several of Grieve's female friends were strengthened from that program in their attitude about dealing with breast

cancer. “Elle's confrontational style and cerebral street smarts really drove a rusty nail through the ankle of apathetic indifference,” Grieve adds. “I had her tipped to be our first president”.

Gorr started the new cycle in her career with Margarita Georgiades painting her portrait as an entry in the Archibald Prize. Gorr was no newcomer to portraiture. Her first experience was being painted by the son of Holocaust survivors, and the other time she sat, she was marooned on Scotland island with a lusty painter and no water taxi in sight.

Georgiades' portrait is the first topless finalist in the Archibald Prize, and one the artist is immensely proud of. She says simply, “Working with Libbi was the most inspirational experience I've ever had”.

Earlier this year, Gorr attended Tropfest, the world's largest short film festival, held for one night each year in and around Darlinghurst in Sydney. Its aim is to showcase the work of emerging filmmakers and to give them the opportunity to screen their films for their peers in a festive environment, encouraging production, not just exhibition.

It was there that someone suggested Gorr apply for Tropnest, the writing arm of Tropfest, an independent screenwriters' centre located at Fox Studios and haven for writers in the midst of the filmmaking industry. Gorr submitted her work and was awarded one of only four mentorships.

“I'm working on a feature in a very quiet environment,” Gorr says. “I'm able to do other stuff around it, other work as a means of exploring. I was offered lots and lots of other stuff while I was doing Elle McFeast, but I could never take it. I can't tell you how good it feels. It's time.”

It's time, too, for Gorr to devote more time to the personal life she shares with the long-time partner she refers to only as “Adventure Man”. Her “surfing mathematician” told her only recently that most things in life can be solved through a mathematical formula. “One of the reasons he continues our relationship is because I'm such a challenge,” Gorr laughs. “I have a very low average rate. It sums it all up.

“He's a good guy and we have a good time together. He takes me surfing, he takes me camping. I was always too driven to do any of that stuff. We're gonna be mates through life”.

True love? “You bet,” she smiles, “although every now and again, I wish he was old and rich and very, very sick, so I could fulfill my Anna Nicole fantasy.”

Babies? “That's the wonderful thing about moving into this new period of my life,” Gorr says. “It brings with it an understanding that you can't actually plan what's going to happen. I'm far too much of a risk taker not to do it though. I'd like to see what it looked like!”

It's not the body clock that moves Gorr now, but the rehearsal clock. She is off to the Athenaeum Theatre in Melbourne, to work more on her stage return in *The Vagina Monologues*, the sometimes hilarious, often disturbing soliloquies created by Eve Ensler to help fight violence against women.

Before she goes, Gorr tells me of an interview she'd done only days earlier to promote the show. She was sad to hear the female journalist ask her about the controversial and "dirty" topics touched on in the *Monologues*.

"If you come from a perspective that female sexuality is shameful then that's the spin you'll have on the topics," Gorr shrugs. "But if you come from the perspective that sexuality is a joy and a positive part of our lives, how can anything be controversial about it? Rape, mutilation, they're the shameful parts, not having a twiddle under the covers when you're 12."

The brash and bold McFeast is now in mothballs, and it is the more demure, sensitive Libbi Gorr who is poised to step into the spotlight. And off she goes, to talk about her vagina to a theatre full of total strangers ...

Gorr's writing mate Bradley Grieve suspects people will see the retirement of Elle McFeast as the end.

"Trust me," he smiles. "It's just the beginning ..."

* *Sex Cells* starring Elle McFeast will screen later this year on Network Ten.