

SCRIPPS

THE WOMEN'S COLLEGE • CLAREMONT

WOMEN of the World



Sandra Fettes '76

A self-described perfectionist "becomes" one of the pop world's most famous icons.

SCRIPPS WOMEN:

pioneering, daring, innovative, and just plain amazing. All that and more. Here are stories of six alumnae who have used their brains, courage, and talent to follow their dreams, change others' lives, and inspire us all.



“When it’s time to perform,
there’s no going back.
It’s showtime!”

Being Cher

by Mary Shipp Bartlett

THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICE ABOUT the performer is the hair: an extravagant display of black curls that could blanket a full-sized poodle. Then there’s the look: a take-no-prisoners, this is who I am, don’t mess with me gaze from almond-shaped brown eyes. Add high cheekbones, sculpted features, and a toned, statuesque 6’2” frame—accessorized with jeweled crucifixes—and you’d swear you’re looking at the real thing.

Sandra Wood (her stage name) almost makes Cher seem the impersonator. Even before opening her mouth.

Yet it is Wood’s performance, in addition to her appearance, that sets her above the rest of Cher look-alikes in the world of celebrity impersonators. Now, represented by her own agent, she appears at corporate events for such clients as IBM and Xerox, and has appeared in Bette Midler’s “Divine Miss Millennium Tour,” a Cher music video, and various television shows—with a voice and act that could pass for the real thing. And often does.

How did a Scripps graduate, raised in a two-parent, conservative, church-going family in Pasadena, get this gig and become so good at it? And how did she accomplish this while working full time at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, her day job?

At Scripps, Sandra Fettes ’76 studied dance and cello, not singing. After college, armed with a degree in history, she turned to accounting and bookkeeping. Realizing this was not her calling, and combined with the sudden death of her father, she felt she had hit rock bottom. “My life was in a downward spiral; I was going nowhere,” she says. “In dance class one day, the instructor suggested, ‘You should go to Vegas and audition.’ My mom said, ‘For this I sent you to Scripps?’”

She made it to Vegas, and auditioned at the MGM Grand Hotel as a covered dancer (that means you’re wearing at least something), and then, because of her height, was tapped to be one of the dancer-showgirls in the musical production *Jubilee!*—a \$10 million stage extravaganza featuring Bob Mackie costumes and spectacular headdresses. “I danced covered, uncovered, and walked the big ‘birthday cake’—the finale staircase—as a showgirl,” Sandra says. “It was exciting to be part of the original cast of a brand new show on the Strip. We did 13 shows a week, seven nights a week, and packed the house for every show.”

Such a schedule, and a dedication to keeping in near-perfect shape took its toll. After six years, she left Vegas. “I burned out and my feet hurt.”

Returning home, Sandra took time out to recuperate. It was then that people would tell her that she reminded them of Cher.

“I’d never heard that before,” Sandra says. “I wasn’t trying to look like her. Impersonation was totally foreign to me.”

Then, Sandra’s mother was in need of a program for the annual church Christmas party and suggested that she do Cher. “I thought, this is crazy, and really didn’t take it too seriously.” But for the next couple of years, Sandra collected photos of Cher, then finally had someone do her makeup and went over to Ron Smith’s Celebrity Look-Alikes agency in Hollywood. It was “Don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

Months later they did. The agency hired her to be part of a stunt to crash the red carpet at the Academy Awards and be filmed for Fox TV. This was in 1989, the year after Cher had won the Oscar for *Moonstruck*. Sandra, a novice to the impersonator game, didn’t know what she was in for. “I thought people would know we were look-alikes; I was that naive. I thought we’d do a little schtick, they’d film it, and we’d be gone. But, no, I’m the first one to step out of the hired limo at the Shrine Auditorium, and people in the bleachers were screaming, ‘Cher! Cher!’”

To her right and to her left, Sandra saw the real Candice Bergen and Jodie Foster getting out of limos. “This is one place you’d never put yourself as a celebrity impersonator,” she says. “This night is for the real celebrities. We’re not trying to take over their lives. It was very embarrassing. Even after we got out of it and were walking down the street, people were still hanging over the bleachers shouting, ‘Cher! Cher! I thought, stop it. I’m not Cher.’”

After that experience, Sandra attended a celebrity impersonator mixer, where she met booking agents who subsequently got her some jobs for corporate receptions and parties. It was strictly “mixing and mingling,” with no singing. “I didn’t know how to sing at that time,” she admits. But she realized that if she were to continue doing Cher, she would have to learn.

When Sandra makes up her mind to do something, she reaches for perfection. “I do everything to the *n*th degree,” she says. Here she was, a non-singer, planning to learn how to sound like one of the most recognizable voices in the pop music world. Not an easy task.

She started by lip-synching to Cher’s records. Every time Cher appeared on TV, she’d watch and take note. “I spent hours going over her tracks, looking at her music videos, watching her movements and what she was wearing. Then I moved on to what’s called vocal elimination: you take Cher’s track, digitize it, strip out the central track [her vocal], then sing along with her track. I would become the lead vocal. Now, I have a recording engineer who composes all my tracks on his computer.”



Capturing Cher's voice was a challenge, even with singing lessons. "Cher has a unique sound," Sandra explains. "She doesn't have a great voice—even Cher herself admits this, but when you hear her, you know it's Cher. She has a smokey, covered sound, even on her high belts. I have had some of my tracks written down a half or whole step to a more comfortable range where I feel I sound more like Cher."

Sandra takes pride in having and maintaining some of the best wigs and costumes in the business. She has 10 of Cher's signature big black curly ones, from Singapore (Sandra actually combines two wigs for a fuller look), and others ranging from blonde straight to red straight. Her costume designer, Margi Kent, has done Fleetwood Mac, Stevie Nicks, Michelle Lee, and Mariah Carey, among others. Sandra also has a beader who applies each sequin and crystal by hand.

"I spend quite a bit of money," says Sandra. "Look-alikes are often thought of as third-rate entertainment, primarily because there are a lot of what I call 'Halloween look-alikes.' So, if you're a legitimate tribute artist, you have to be at a different level, and hope the industry recognizes the difference."

The business, Sandra admits, has had its interesting moments. For a corporate biker-themed event, she rode into the event on the back of a Harley. Then there was the time she arrived on horseback to the

strains of "Half-Breed." She has performed in shows all across the U.S., including Alaska and Hawaii, and was flown to Banff, Canada, for a one-hour mix and mingle.

Sandra has met Cher once, while doing a music video in 1997 as Cher's double. She claims she was never a Cher fanatic, although she always enjoyed the Sonny and Cher television shows, tuning in to see what outrageous outfit the star was wearing, but never feeling any particular identity with her. "She and I are very unlike in personality and experiences. For one, she's a Democrat and I'm a Republican. I graduated from a private women's college; she dropped out of high school. Her mother was married eight times, three times to Cher's father; my parents were married for 35 years.

There is also a substantial height difference, with Cher at least 8 inches shorter than 6'2" Sandra. But because Cher is a "larger-than-life" personality and played up being taller than Sonny on TV, she gives the illusion of more height. And, no, Sandra has not had any ribs removed. Nor other surgery to look more like Cher.

Sandra impersonates Cher in the way that she herself sees Cher—strong without being hard, and also soft and appealing. "I try not to be a caricature of Cher, like being over-the-top with her mannerisms, which is common with some impersonators."

Sandra sometimes finds herself slipping into Cherisms in her daily life. "Sometimes I'll lick my lips like she does. A friend will say, 'Oh, you just did that Cher thing.' 'I did?' I'll say. Or sometimes I'll have a sound in my voice, like 'Oh, okaaaaay,' and it's just me talking, but it comes out like Cher. At times, it is difficult to remember what my mannerisms were before I was doing Cher."

"I'm a naturally reserved person," she admits. "I like to be behind the scenes, in the shadows, not necessarily in the spotlight. So what was in me to pick up and go to Vegas? What was in me to do Cher? You know the saying, 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread'? Well, that's me in a nutshell. Like taking Dr. Brogden's classes at Scripps. He was an amazing history professor. His classes were notorious; they scared me to death. But I knew if I hung in there, I would reap the benefits. From that experience, I did develop the ability to 'think independently...and live confidently and courageously.'"

Sandra doesn't expect to do Cher forever. "I don't think even Cher could do Cher forever," she muses. She has other dreams, but with so much vested in Cher, she will impersonate a while longer. "Besides," she says, "when the show 'kills' and you're knocking their socks off, it's such a great feeling. It just feels good when I can make the audience feel good."

"I still get knots in my stomach before each show. I pace and try to take some deep breaths. Then I hear, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, here she is, the one and only Cher'—and the nervousness melts away. It's like being scared and exhilarated at the same time. When it's time to perform, there's no going back. It's showtime!" ■