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**Caption(s):** Chrissie Hynde rocks on at the BilbaoLive music festival in Spain last year.;Photo: REUTERS

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Chrissie Hynde: 'Rock 'n' roll started out as a young man's game and now all the old timers are still at it'

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'I still try not to drink and smoke, but it's a daily thing. You try to get through the day, don't you?'

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SHE has survived drugs, fame, motherhood and countless ex-partners over three decades. But Chrissie Hynde is keeping it real before The Pretenders perform in New Plymouth. MICHELLE SUTTON reports

THE ultimate rock chick is 55 and living in a bachelor flat. Chrissie Hynde is single and alone; her two daughters have grown up, moved out and taken her cat, leaving the mother of punk to retreat under her trademark, heavy fringe.

She is hiding from fame, celebrity culture and anything mainstream but after 28 years fronting The Pretenders she is failing somewhat.

She would be a recluse, of sorts, if it weren't for the extraordinary success of her 1978 founded band, or the drug overdoses that killed two members of her band. Or those infamous relationships with Kinks' front man Ray Davies and Simple Minds front man Jim Kerr, both of whom left their partners for a romance with Hynde.

She is whippet thin, still as sexy now as she was at 22 when she left her home town in Ohio for London.

Her philosophies haven't changed either. Her vegetarian lifestyle and moral values have maintained her rock sensibilities, she says.

So it is no surprise, when I call Hynde in London that she is shunning dinner parties, television and award ceremonies, still uncomfortable with her success.

"I got in a band so I wouldn't be in the mainstream. I got in a band so I would not be a household name, so really it was me not wanting to be a big icon," she says.

It makes sense then, that she was nonchalant when The Pretenders were invited into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in 2005.

She considered rejecting the honour but thought that would cause more of a fuss than accepting it, so the band was inducted by Neil Young.

"The hall of fame was set up by industry people who probably wanted to be in the Rock 'n' Roll hall of fame. It's all about lists and award ceremonies and I think it's creepy. It's

not me," says Hynde.

She has never restrained her scathing tongue. She loathes big business, mainstream establishments, eating meat and animal cruelty.

She was arrested during a protest against Kentucky Fried Chicken in Paris in 2003, while working with animal rights group PETA (People for Ethical Treatment of Animals) but she keeps her distance from that organisation, too.

"I'm not really on the front line and I don't like to do too much in a high-profile way when I don't have an album out because it creates an imbalance and I become like a professional celebrity."

On that subject, Hynde directs her loathing towards the soft porn that passes for music videos.

Her advice to female rockers trying to sell a video by "sticking their boobs out" and with a string of pearls in their mouth, is typically blunt: "Remember you're in a rock and roll band. It's not f... me; it's f... you!"

The industry's recognition of The Pretenders comes under her critique, too: "We got in there because eventually when your number comes up after 25 years then whoever's not dead gets in the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame."

But her speciality is self-deprecation. She may be world famous, but Hynde is one of the few celebrities who has never believed her publicity hype.

"I read a great message from someone the other week that said your first albums were great, then you had kids and it all went down hill and I think that's true. Domesticity does kind of f... it up for the artist," she says.

"And I always put my children first."

Hynde was 28 when The Pretenders eventually made it. Before that she had squatted and shoplifted around London and lived in the Sex Pistols' rehearsal room, immersed herself in reggae and punk along with the Kinks and The Who, convinced she was too old to be in a rock band.

THE irony of that amuses Hynde now. "God look how thing's have changed," she laughs, husky and loud. "Rock 'n' roll started out as a young man's game and now all the old timers are still at it."

She was one of the first women to successfully front a rock band in the 70s and 80s, and being one of the few rock chicks was a huge advantage, says Hynde, but she never wanted to be a novelty act. Nor did she hope to be a role model for others, although she has been described as one of the most influential women in rock.

"I haven't done anything for women. I just wanted to front my little rock band."

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Especially not when drugs took a deathly hold on The Pretenders and, in 1982, founding member James Honeyman-Scott overdosed on heroin and cocaine, followed by her ex-lover, bass player Pete Farndon, who was only 25, a year later.

Hynde says she narrowly avoided the same fate but with great difficulty.

"I still try not to drink and smoke, but it's a daily thing. You try to get through the day, don't you?"

And, she points out: "Everyone took and does take drugs. You'll find estate agents probably take more cocaine than rock bands."

Among the drugs and rock 'n' roll of the 80s, when the band was churning out hits like Chain Gang and Don't Get Me Wrong, there was also plenty of sex. But this seems to hit

a nerve with Hynde.

"I've always felt like I'm not at all defined by my relationships, well the few that you know about."

OK, says Hynde, getting defensive, how many guys do you know that I've been with? Well, first there was Ray Davis, from the Kinks, with whom you had a daughter, Natalie. Later you broke up with him to be with Simple Minds' frontman Jim Kerr while you were touring New Zealand in 1984, which resulted in second daughter Yasmin. Then there was a Colombian sculptor, 14 years younger and also your second ex-husband, all of whom you say you remain friends with.

"Well, in that case," says Hynde, "I would say I have got away with murder. I'd just got in the game when I met Ray, so maybe I blabbed my mouth a little bit and I had a child with him, and Jim, so that's obviously hard to hide."

Happily, she concludes: "You don't know anything, so my private life is really my private life."

But just in case, she adds as an afterthought: "if you can only mention like maybe five or six guys that I have been with then I will be very happy."

These days she is single, nearing menopause, and entering, she says, a very disturbing time.

"I know a lot of women my age. Their kids leave home and they're on their own and it's disturbing."

Motherhood was lovely, grounding, but her daughters have moved out and she is alone. Lonely at times, too, but not unhappy about it, and it is certainly better than arguing with someone whose company she doesn't enjoy any more.

"I see that around me a lot."

Besides, says Hynde, she is back in her bachelor flat and feeling great about focusing on her band.

The band's new guitarist, Nick Wilkinson, whose wife lives in New Zealand, has brought new energy to the band.

Hynde is working on new songs and has another one or two albums to put out, perhaps.

"How many 55-year-old women can hang out with a band? I can't believe my luck," she says, refusing to waver from her rock 'n' roll ideals after almost 30 years. \*

\* The Pretenders play at New Plymouth's TSB Bowl of Brookland on February 5 and at Auckland's St James Theatre on February 6.

