

emma

From star-obsessed teenager to Oscar nominee, Emma Stone has fulfilled her dream of success in Hollywood. Here, she tells Elaine Lipworth how she finally found her voice in her new film, *La La Land*

Every teenager goes through an “I want to be a Hollywood star” stage. Most parents wait for them to grow out of it. When Emma Stone was 15, however, her parents let her chase the dream. The 28-year-old actress, luminous on this sunny morning with her trademark red hair dyed closer to its natural blonde colour and pulled into an intricate plaited bun, is passionately explaining how she was “absolutely obsessed” with acting as a child, to the point that her parents knew she was for real.

“They could tell I was serious, because I kept doing all these plays and acting was my favourite thing in the world. It still is,” laughs Stone. “I would punish my child if they told me they were leaving home. I would not be like, ‘Let’s go!’ I’d be like, ‘Let’s finish high school!’”

It’s a backstory that echoes the plot of her latest film, the Oscar-buzzy *La La Land*, where she plays Mia, an aspiring small-town actress with big dreams to make it in LA. When we first meet her, Mia is locking eyes with Sebastian – a brilliant but broke jazz pianist – on a gridlocked freeway, played by the man everyone would want to meet when stuck in LA traffic: Ryan Gosling. There’s nothing original about the plot – two dreamers take an instant dislike to each other and after a series of false starts, fall madly in love, before hitting problems. But *La La Land* is exhilarating, a contemporary love story infused with old-fashioned cinematic magic.

There are predictions that the movie, from the prodigiously talented 31-year-old filmmaker Damien Chazelle (*Whiplash*), will herald a return to Hollywood’s musical heyday. “Emma’s got this thing that feels timeless and reminds me of Carole Lombard or Katharine Hepburn; great, old-Hollywood actresses who were witty, sassy and accessible, but also had this ▷

other-worldly magic that kept them floating a little bit over the air,” says Chazelle.

Today, the actress is sparkling with a bit of that very magic, her emerald-patterned butterfly-skull print Alexander McQueen dress accentuating her green saucer eyes. It’s a face that’s immediately so familiar, first coming to our attention in the charming teen flick *Easy A* (2010) and then dramas such as the 2011 hit *The Help*. One of Woody Allen’s muses, she appeared in his films, *Magic In The Moonlight* (2014), and *Irrational Man* (2015). And she shone in the comic book blockbuster *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2012) playing Gwen Stacy, opposite Andrew Garfield, her former boyfriend. Currently single, she won’t discuss her love life, although she says her ex is “someone I still love very much”.

Romance is the only subject off-limits during our interview. Stone is more than happy talking about her other meaningful relationships, specifically her family. Evidence of her strong family bond is a tattoo on her wrist of “little bird feet” designed by former Beatle Paul McCartney as a gift for her mother, Krista, to celebrate her remission from breast cancer. Stone initially met McCartney, who she describes as “an incredibly kind and cool person,” when she became involved with the charity, Stand Up To Cancer, in 2008.

“My mum is a huge Beatles fan, her favourite song is “Blackbird”. Paul drew the feet on paper and then a tattoo artist did the tattoos,” she explains. “My whole family got them, so it was really special.”

Krista also helped shape her daughter’s early passion for musical theatre. Growing up in Scottsdale, Arizona, Emily Jean Stone (she changed her name when she started performing professionally) loved nothing more than a mother-daughter trip to New York to see a Broadway show. “I saw *Les Mis* on Broadway when I was eight. I saw *Rent* a billion times – I was obsessed. Oh man,” sighs Stone, eyes widening as she reflects on the experiences that shaped her.

So west they went, chasing the LA dream. She was home-schooled and credits her “very supportive” parents for providing stability in the midst of an unstable existence, flying between LA and Arizona. “My mum had a cool philosophy that she called ‘reins out’ which meant: ‘I totally trust that you will make good decisions and the only reason that I would pull the reins in, is if you don’t do that,’” explains Stone.

Ostensibly, it seems that Stone’s career trajectory has been a breeze, but she says it wasn’t that simple. “I auditioned for three years, just getting a couple of guest parts on TV shows.” When she wasn’t driving herself to auditions in her red Volkswagen Beetle, Stone worked behind the counter in a dog bakery – yes, a bakery selling

“Ryan and I respect each other, we rag on each other, we laugh and we get each other as actors. Wait until you see him play piano – he’s unbelievable”

dog treats – to supplement her meagre acting roles (to this day she loves baking ... for humans).

Krista must be incredibly proud of her daughter, who is simply mesmerising in *La La Land*. “The idea of telling this modern story of two struggling artists, but in a 1950s-style musical version of today’s Los Angeles, was intoxicating,” says Stone, in her deep, smoky voice. “We fly, we sing, we dance and it’s beautiful, with scenes that are funny and some that are heartbreaking.”

Yet filming *La La Land* wasn’t without its challenges for the actor, who suffered stage fright as a teenager. “I always had a fear of singing because I would lose my voice a lot,” she admits. Her concerns evaporated when Chazelle told her he “loved it when there was a misstep or something was off-key, he didn’t mind if we were a little raw and rough around the edges”.

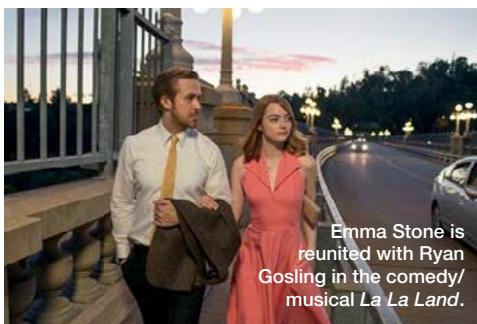
The connection between Stone and Gosling, who previously generated potent chemistry in *Crazy Stupid Love* (2011) and *Gangster Squad* (2013), is paramount in the film. “There is something very poignant about Ryan and Emma,” says Chazelle. “Like the stars of old Hollywood, you’re rooting for them to get together, then when things start not going so well, there’s a sense of loss.” For her part, Stone says it was “wonderful” to be reunited with Gosling. “We respect each other, we rag on each other, we laugh and we get each other as actors.

Wait until you see him play piano – he’s unbelievable!”

Next up, Stone plays the US tennis legend Billy Jean King opposite Steve Carell in *Battle Of The Sexes*. It depicts the historic 1973 match in which King, 29 at the time, easily defeated her 55-year-old opponent, retired Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs, fuelling a global debate on gender equality. “Getting to know Billie

Jean [now 73] was fantastic,” says Stone. “It was a privilege to tell her story because she is so inspiring. She was driven from age 12 to become the best tennis player in the world and she made it happen.”

Similarly, I suggest, Stone has carved out her own destiny with great success. She disagrees. “You can measure tennis, you can see who wins the game. With a sport, you can prepare and then you either have the talent to execute it or not. With acting it’s more subjective, it’s more a matter of taste. I do know I’ve been lucky to tell stories I feel passionate about.”



Emma Stone is reunited with Ryan Gosling in the comedy/musical *La La Land*.



One of the central themes in *Battle Of The Sexes* is equal pay. It relates how King and eight other pioneering women, including Australians Kerry Melville Reid and Judy Tegart Dalton, controversially broke away from the US Lawn Tennis Association in 1970, creating their own organisation due to the huge disparity in prize money paid to male and female players. “Now, 47 years on, we are still having the conversation,” says Stone, incredulously. “Women everywhere are still not paid the same as men, but it’s clear-cut: a woman doing the same job as a man should be paid the same.”

Stone applauds her friend Jennifer Lawrence’s 2015 attack on film studios for paying women less than their male counterparts. “I don’t think Jennifer was just talking about Hollywood, she was talking about the world at large,” explains Stone, noting that in Hollywood, the whole issue is more complicated because fees are related to box office. “Jennifer’s much more well-versed in that than I am because she has studied all of it. But I have been fortunate, I have been paid equally to my male co-stars for quite a while now and that just makes sense,” says Stone, whose net worth is reportedly around \$10 million a year.

The actor admits there’s been an embarrassment of riches in terms of the roles she’s played. “I am a bit spoilt right now, it’s been incredible. Like Billie Jean King, Mia in *La La Land* takes charge of her life, she does her own thing – she’s a one-woman show and she busts out into a world of her own creativity.” Stone is aware that with her current clout, she’s in a powerful position to advocate for change. “It lights a fire under your ass in the sense that it’s important, our voice needs to be heard,” she says. “You want to be able to articulate the kind of roles you want to see, especially if you are in a position where you can make suggestions.”

“Women are still not paid the same as men, but it’s clear-cut: a woman doing the same job as a man should be paid the same”

Reflective, Stone is also intent on balancing her life away from the film set. She values her close friendships with women. Along with Jennifer Lawrence, her “small group” includes last year’s Oscar winner for *Room*, Brie Larson. “I have very good friends who I trust so much, a few are in the public eye, who have similar jobs to me, but that is not what we talk about. We stay at home, cooking, watching movies or TV.”

At the top of her game professionally, perhaps because she’s achieved so much so young, her current goals don’t concern her brilliant career at all. “Now it is all about having a really comfortable house where my friends can come and spend time ... and I would definitely love to have a family. I think my dreams have changed a bit. I’ve come down to earth.” □

