

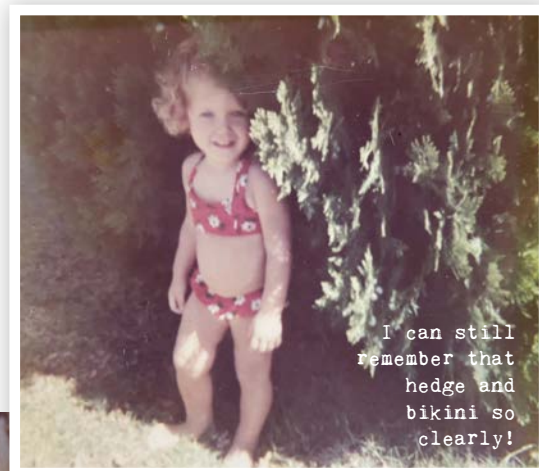
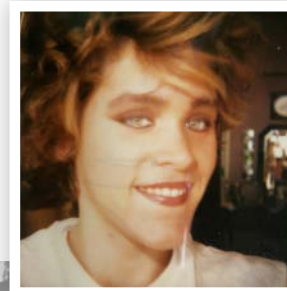
BETH HART

*'The piano feels like  
a big hand, and I can  
go sit in that hand  
and find comfort there'*

**AMERICAN SINGER, SONGWRITER AND MUSICIAN BETH  
HART IS KNOWN FOR HER RAW, DEEPLY CONFESSIONAL  
LYRICS. HERE, SHE TALKS ABOUT WHAT, AFTER YEARS  
OF STRUGGLING WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES,  
HAS HELPED HER FIND PEACE OF MIND.**



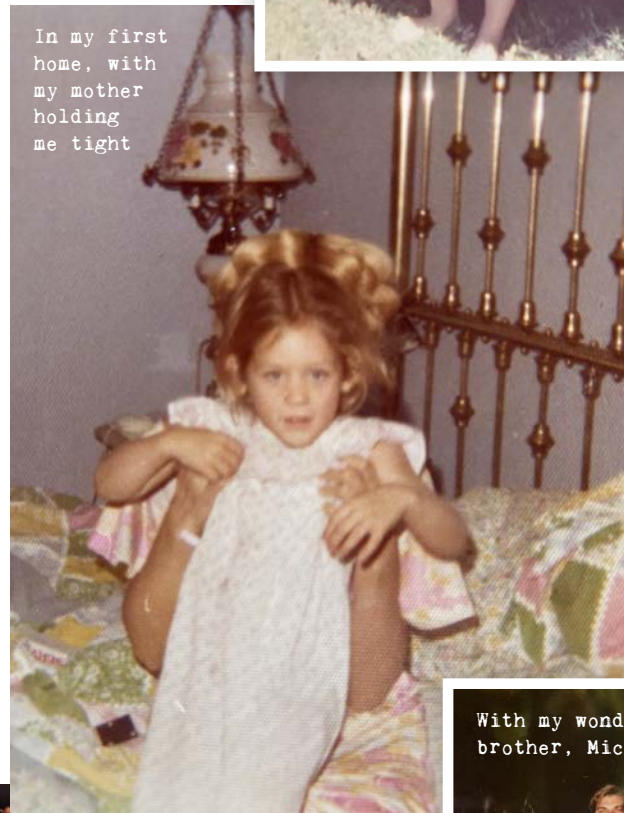
Check out those eyebrows!



I can still remember that hedge and bikini so clearly!



One of my first school photos



In my first home, with my mother holding me tight



With my wonderful brother, Michael



My niece Jade and I



Me and my high-school friend Sonya

## PAST

**'I REMEMBER BEING IN MY BEDROOM WHEN I WAS FIVE OR SIX AND LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR AND I MADE A COMMITMENT THAT I WOULD PLAY MUSIC, NO MATTER WHAT'**

I was really young when I started playing the piano—my mom couldn't get me off it. She tried to get my brother, Michael, and sister, Sharon, to take piano lessons, and she'd always have to hound them about it. But with me, she would be trying to get me *off* the piano, because I'd just stay there all day.

I loved playing music, and I loved my family. My family was great. But I had a hard time making friends when I was really little. Any time I would make one, their mom would bring them to our house. I'd sit them down in a chair that was next to our piano, and I'd just play and play and play. These poor kids were bored out of their minds. So I didn't have really a lot of social skills or connection in school.

I remember being in my bedroom when I was five or six and looking into the mirror, and I made a commitment that I would play music, no matter what. It's the weirdest thing, but I can remember it. My father was always very career-driven, so he was a really hard worker. **I said to myself, "Listen, you are going to do this. You might not make the money your father has made, but you're going to do this because this is what you love.** No matter what, you do this, no matter what happens". If I had to have a job to survive and eat, I would, but I said, "Nothing will get in the way of me spending a lot of time at the piano".

The music that my mom played for me when I was a child were the classics—Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Billie Holiday—which are just masterpieces of songwriting. I remember thinking, 'Okay, I can write the music, but my lyrics are terrible. They are nothing like these amazing songs'. So that became a real focus for me. I started listening to people that I considered to be great lyricists. I really got into James Taylor, Carole King, Rickie Lee Jones, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen. People who didn't just use their voices to build a song, but who used their stories, too.

**I started writing from such a young age because I had a lot of pain. There was a lot of drama that took place in my childhood.** My parents divorced, and my dad ended up in prison for a few years. I would write a lot about the pain of watching my sister struggle with AIDS and addiction. I wrote about my mother, and her pain of my father leaving her for another woman. And I'd write about my dad's guilt and shame, and my sadness of being abandoned by him. And I'd write about seeking God. I wouldn't write about a boy that I was in love with; I was writing about what I was struggling with and what I didn't understand.

When I was fifteen, I finally got some friends who I met through high school performing arts. They are some of my best friends to this day: Eric, Ron and Becky. All of them were,

and still are, artists. It was these friends who first got me playing out at the clubs in south-central Los Angeles. Ron said, "Listen, we're going to start playing at these showcases. Anybody can get up, and you just give your sheet music to the pianist there or the band there. Then you sing a song. And we can hit three or four clubs in one night".

**You had one song. If they liked you, each person would give you a few bucks. But if they didn't like you, they kicked you out of the club.** They booed you, and then you had to leave. You could come back the next week, but you couldn't stay. It was so humbling and funny and fun. And we were watching, and being inspired, and getting to learn from the other singers there that were just genius—so amazing and soulful. They just cemented the deal for me. I was like, 'Man, I'm going to learn how to like my voice someday. This is the direction I want to go in: more blues, more soul, more jazz'. >

## PRESENT

**'I WAS LIKE: "THIS IS IT. I'M ANGRY WITH BEING A WOMAN. I'M GOING TO EXPRESS MY ANGER LIKE A MAN. I'M GOING TO SURVIVE".'**

But that didn't happen. Instead of doing that, I entered a TV talent show called *Star Search*. And I did pretty well: I won. Yet afterward, I couldn't get a record deal. I couldn't get a career going. **At that point, I wasn't being medicated for my bipolar disorder, so my mental illness started getting worse. And I had started getting into drugs.** There was a lot of chaos in my life, but I was still very ambitious and focused on my career. So I really got into heavy rock and roll. And I was like, 'This is it. I'm angry with being a woman. I'm going to express my anger like a man. I'm going to survive.'

By this point, I was 21. When I was 22, my sister passed away. She was 32. I became lead singer of a band, and we were doing really heavy rock. And then I got a major record deal with Atlantic Records. We put out our first album, and it didn't do great. We did a world tour, but there would be nobody at the shows; just the bartender, that was it.

Then I made a shift in my songwriting, where I went back more to what I'd been doing before, and I made an album called *Screamin' for My Supper*. That's when I had my first hit single, and got real air play on the radio in the US. Everyone at Atlantic really got behind it, but I couldn't handle it. I still wasn't on medication, and I was still messing around with drugs. So, with the pressure of having my first real success—suddenly I was going on late

night talk shows like those of David Letterman and Jay Leno, all these things that I had seen other artists do on TV— but I didn't feel worthy, and I just started destroying myself.

I had a lot of issues around my weight. I just starved myself. I found a particular drug that really relaxed me and totally shut off my hunger, and I just got really sick. So Atlantic dropped me. And I think that if I had of become a big star, they wouldn't have done so, and I probably would have died. But I didn't become a star, I got dropped. Something about that just made me go, 'What am I doing? I'm blessed. Why am I destroying myself? What is going on?'

I met Scott when he started working for me when I was 27 and I was out on the road. We got together, but I still wasn't well. I was still going out and forging prescriptions from psychiatrists and getting drugs to get high on. I was still doing bad things. I ended up being admitted into my first psychiatric ward, and Scott was the only person to come visit me. It happened to be at the hospital that I was born in, and they had a psychiatric ward there. I remember him coming to visit, and he was so gorgeous. **I was thinking, 'This guy is so cute. What is wrong with him? Why is he coming to visit me?'**

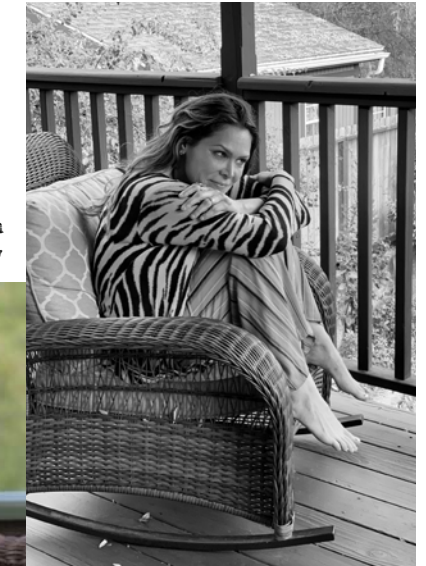
There's no way to really describe what a generous, patient and compassionate person Scott is. He is

just a good guy. My own friends said, "What is he doing with you? Why?!" And I said it, too. I said to him, "What are you? A sucker for punishment? What the hell are you doing here?" And he replied that when he was with me, he had a feeling of home, and I remember feeling that with him, too. I didn't yet accept that I had a mental illness, but I did accept that I had alcoholism. So I sought help for that, which really helped. **I was able to get (and stay) married to Scott, and I was able to get my career going again, albeit on a smaller scale.** I got a new record deal, touring the Netherlands, Denmark and New Zealand, and some parts of the US. Only as an opening act, and just whenever someone would say yes to me opening for them. And that went on for years. >



Working on the video for 'Bad Woman Blues'

Relaxing on my balcony



Strumming Jon's (the band's guitarist) guitar

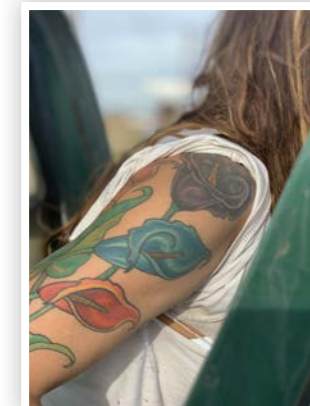


With Scott, the love of my life

Photoshoot for my album 'War in my mind'



My latest tattoo



Performing at MusiCares, 2010

## FUTURE

**'MY ATTITUDE TOWARD BIPOLAR NOW IS, "OKAY, SO I MIGHT HAVE THIS, BUT IT'S NOT GOING TO OWN ME. I'M GOING TO OWN IT".'**

Then, at 35, after years of being sober, I had a really bad mental breakdown. Doctors told me, "You've got a mental illness. If you don't take medicine, you are going to have another breakdown". I went into my longest stint in a psychiatric ward; I was there for over a month and a half. Previously, I'd only had '5150's, which in California, is the legal code for involuntary, 72-hour psychiatric holds for people who present a danger to themselves. I'd never had them keep me in hospital that long, and they wouldn't let me go.

Everybody in that ward had different types of mental disorders. The beauty of it was, they had us all do tons of reading and studying on our specific diagnoses. And then they taught us the things we had to do, other than take medicine, in order for the medicine to be helpful.

They said, "It's not enough that you stay sober, and it's not enough that you take medication. You have to learn meditation. You need to have a consistent exercise regimen. You have to get sunlight". And they checked my hormones to see if I had any hormonal imbalances. That can play a huge part in mental illness. I was so thankful for that place. **It was the first time in my life that I said, "Okay. I accept what I have. I'm going to take medicine on a consistent basis".**

I didn't really start liking the sound of my voice until I was in my late 30s. Nowadays, I do. But on stage, it's

telling stories in between the songs that is my favorite thing. Any time I meet someone on the street, for example, who has come to a show, they don't come up to me and say, "Oh, I love your show or your music". Instead, they always share something personal about themselves with me. When that happens, I know I've made a connection with someone. During the pandemic, I wanted to talk to my fans, because we were all at home. Myself and my team thought it might be a cool idea to make a home video, with fans taking a photo or filming themselves at home to send in. We collaged it all together like a music video for my song 'No Place Like Home'.

I feel like every time I'm open and honest about who I am: what my weaknesses are, what my fears are, how ugly I have been and how parts of myself are still ugly, and how I'm still going to have ugliness in the future... it's natural. It's part of being human. It's the most relatable part of you. **Our broken spots are our most beautiful parts, and they create room for something else that is beautiful to come in.**

In my 40s, I now have my father back in my life. My husband is the reason. Scott healed my heart so much that all my anger and feelings of abandonment for my dad left. I was able to understand that my dad didn't leave me when I was a child; he abandoned himself. So I was able, for the first time, to have compassion for him, to see my

dad as this human being who's trying to do the best that he can, just like the rest of us, who will mess up, and mess up again, because that's part of being human. **Once I started feeling that way toward my dad, I was able to be with him and not make him feel afraid or guilty or ashamed.** He could see that I loved him as much, if not more, than I did when I was little.

Still, to this day, every morning when I get up, the first thing I do after I brush my teeth, make the bed, take my vitamins and all that kind of stuff, is I go right down to the piano. And I usually stay there most of the day. The piano feels like a big hand, and I can go sit in that hand and find comfort there. And I'm so thankful for that, because I would be in big trouble without it.

My attitude toward bipolar now is, 'Okay, so I might have this, but it's not going to own me. I'm going to own it. And I'm not going to feel sorry for myself about it. I'm just going to do what I've got to do'. I feel the blessing of all my experiences today. I see the blessing of alcoholism, and I see the blessing of bipolar disorder. There is so much humility that comes with that. I needed something to let me know that I cannot do this thing alone; I've got to reach out for help. And I know when I am feeling well, how lucky I am. I enjoy it, because it won't last. I'll feel bad again at some point in the future, and then I'll deal with that. But that's the beauty of it all, you know? ●



INTERVIEW OLIVIA GAGAN PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES