



‘SINGING  
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DREAM’

She studied law at Oxford and clinical psychology in Paris, but for years art collector and philanthropist MIEL DE BOTTON struggled to find her vocation. Now she has stepped out of the shadow of her philosopher brother Alain and found her voice as a singer-songwriter

INTERVIEW *Catherine O'Brien*  
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**S**HORTLY BEFORE I am due to interview Miel de Botton, I find myself, by chance, talking to someone who was at school with her back in the 1980s. So what was she like, Miel, the Marlborough College girl? 'Oh, she was clever, kind, beautiful – definitely one of life's goddesses,' says my acquaintance.

Miel went to Oxford and seemed destined for great things. But in the intervening years, it is instead her younger brother who has risen to prominence. Philosopher Alain de Botton is the author of 12 bestselling books and widely regarded as a sage *de nos jours*. Miel, meanwhile, has kept a studiously low profile – until now.

A few weeks ago, at a gala dinner in the Great Hall of St Bartholomew's Hospital in London, Miel took to the stage and held the audience spellbound. The evening raised almost £100,000 for the cancer charity Maggie's and also unveiled Miel as a major singer-songwriter talent. Under the guidance of producer Andy Wright (whose credits include collaborations with Mick Hucknall, Jeff Beck and Eurythmics) she has already recorded her first single, and an album release is scheduled for later this year.

Miel is in her mid-40s, an age when many authors and painters make their mark. Late-blooming musicians, however, are a rarer phenomenon. 'If you'd asked me as a little girl what my biggest dream was, it would have been to ►

**Miel at home with a sculpture by artist Andy Goldsworthy**



**Clockwise from far left: Miel and her brother Alain in St Tropez, in Zurich with their parents, and at home, all 1975; at Blenheim Gardens in 1977, and at Klosters the same year. Below: Miel singing at the Maggie's gala dinner**



◀ do what I am doing today,' she says. 'But it was a secret dream. Back then, I could never have imagined this whole new era opening up to me.'

Reserved and quietly spoken, Miel – a divorced mother-of-two – is not someone who strikes you at first sight as a wannabe pop diva. That said, she has, thanks to inherited personal wealth, been living what some might consider a superstar lifestyle for many years. Her time is split between two UK residences: the first has one of London's most desirable postcodes, while the second – where we meet – is a Grade I-listed country retreat, which was designed by celebrated architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. Since buying the house as a wreck 12 years ago, Miel has overseen a restoration that reflects her less-is-more taste. Inside is a temple of serenity, with pale wooden floors and creamy soft furnishings providing the backdrop for artworks by, among others, Grayson Perry, Tracey Emin and Anish Kapoor. Outside, a stunning stacked oak sculpture by award-winning natural artist Andy Goldsworthy forms the garden centrepiece.

The de Botton fortune stems from Miel and Alain's father Gilbert, an Egyptian Jew who was born penniless but left a family trust fund of more than £200 million when he died aged 65. His genius was to create Global Asset Management – a company that, through a network of worldwide contacts, reinvented the way the rich invested their money. With the help of his former employer Jacob Rothschild he started out with £1 million in 1983 and sold the company in 1999 for over £420 million.

Gilbert's drive was rooted in his unsettled childhood – the son of divorced parents, he saw little of his father, an oil company representative, and his committed Zionist mother was imprisoned for a time by the Egyptian authorities. However, he grew up to be not just a brilliant financier, but also

a supremely cultured man who spoke 12 languages and was a connoisseur of contemporary art. Among his claims to fame was being the only person ever to be painted by both Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon – both of whom were his friends. He was a driving force behind the inception of the Tate Modern, where one of the main galleries is named after him. In everything he did, he was a fastidious believer in quality – and that extended to the upbringing of his children.

Miel and Alain's early years were spent in Zurich. Unlike Gilbert, their Swiss-born mother Jacqueline came from a privileged background – her family was in textiles – but Jacqueline had the early heartache, after suffering several miscarriages, of being told she would never be able to have children. 'She was desperate and so determined that she had to spend two entire pregnancies in hospital to give birth to us,' Miel confides. 'So much has been written about my father's achievements, but I just want to give her huge credit for that.'

Jacqueline didn't work but played a vital behind-the-scenes role in Gilbert's success. Miel remembers that she was forever 'giving dinner parties, packing his suitcases and travelling with him when that was the done thing – she really did give him her all.'

Although the family had no UK connections, Gilbert was convinced that only British boarding schools could offer the education he wanted for his daughter and son,

so at the age of 11, Miel was installed at Marlborough while eight-year-old Alain was enrolled at the Dragon School in Oxford. Alain has since described being sent away as a 'miserable' experience and Miel felt much the same – at least to begin with. 'I had a rough time. Our parents were in Switzerland and I felt dumped and traumatised,' she says. 'I have to say it is something I vowed I would never do with my own children.'

During his 20s, Alain famously fell out with his father, labelling him 'a cruel tyrant' and describing his upbringing as one of 'financial ease and emotional deprivation'. Miel doesn't choose those words, but she does recall an immense pressure on them both to excel. 'There was always the feeling that we would be truly loved only if we succeeded,' she explains. 'You had to aspire to excellence, and that was a good thing, but there were also times when the pressure was too high. I can remember once mistakenly leaving my homework at school and I really panicked about it. That was the constant fear that we had, pushing us on.'

Miel's overall memories are happier than Alain's, partly, she believes, because their father struggled with the father-son dynamic, having had a difficult relationship with his own father. But it also helped that Miel and her father shared a similar temperament. For as long as she can remember, she says, music has given her 'a sense of joy and freedom'. In her bedroom – first in Switzerland and later, after her parents moved to the UK, in London – she would spend hours listening to Leonard Cohen and Van Morrison in-between writing poetry and pretending to conduct in front

of the mirror. Music was also one of Gilbert's passions. 'There was always music in the house when we were growing up,' she recalls. Her father would sing French love songs and at the family Seder – the feast to mark the beginning of Passover – he would always call on Miel to sing the ritual Ma Nishtana.

The notion that she might pursue a career in music, however, was never on the agenda. Having provided his children with a first-class education, Gilbert was determined they should use it. 'He would say, "You need to be a professional in life." He thought I would make a great lawyer,' she says. So Miel went to Oxford to read law, but halfway through her course,

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having realised that she was on the wrong path, she asked her father if she could switch to psychology. ‘He would not allow it. He believed once you had started something you had to see it through, and to him psychology was like flower arranging – a subject he couldn’t take seriously.’ So Miel doggedly continued with her law degree, finally achieving a 2:2, and then went to live in Paris, where she trained as a clinical psychologist and graduated with the highest possible marks.

Her desire to study psychology undoubtedly came, she acknowledges, from ‘wanting to find myself – I think I was a little lost’. Her parents divorced around that time, and, interestingly, Alain was also on a journey of self-discovery: having got a double-starred first in history at Cambridge, he went on to do a master’s in philosophy which he has since described as a means of ‘self-therapy’.

But while Alain went public, producing his first book, the autobiographical *Essays in Love*, when he was 23, Miel stayed below the radar. In Paris, she worked as a family therapist and also as a counsellor to drug addicts, jobs which she found ‘challenging, but wonderfully rewarding’. She also married Angus Aynsley, a banker turned film-maker – he is best known for producing *Waste Land*, an Oscar-nominated documentary. They had a son, Zachary, now 14, and, in 2000, were in the midst of relocating to London, where Miel had lined up work at the

Tavistock Clinic, when they received a 3am phone call to tell them that Gilbert had died of a heart attack. ‘It seemed so cruel,’ she says. ‘Just before he died, he had talked about introducing me to philanthropy – he wanted to teach me about the way he supported charities and I wanted to learn from him, but then destiny dealt us this huge blow and, well, it all got too much. I had to take a break.’

For months, she was locked in meetings with lawyers helping to sort out the details of her father’s estate. They were living out of a hotel with one-year-old Zachary until they could get their home set up. ‘I had a close relationship with my father, so it hit me very hard,’ she says. Gradually she navigated a path through her grief, partly by developing her philanthropy – she is a supporter of several causes including the Women of the World Festival and the Weizmann Institute, one of the world’s leading scientific research institutions – and partly by nurturing the interest in modern art that her father had instilled in her:

‘Even as small children, he dragged us around galleries, and, no, we didn’t enjoy it but – and I hope this is of some encouragement to parents who also drag their children around galleries – one day I woke up loving it. Suddenly paintings spoke to me and I felt an emotional connection. After that, I would go around art fairs, and friends would say, “How do you know which ones to buy?” and I would tell them,

“It’s easy; it just comes to me – it’s pure instinct.”’

The evidence of that instinct is all around her home – everything arranged with exquisite flow, from the artwork and ornaments to occasional chairs and cushions. ‘I do like a sense of order,’ she admits. ‘Objects exude such an important influence and I think it would be irresponsible to place them higgledy-piggledy.’ I wonder how she combines this with living with children – as well as Zachary, she has a ten-year-old daughter, Talia. She laughs. ‘Sometimes my son will say, “I know you’ve been into my room Mum and you’ve put this stuff under the desk, but I want it *on* the desk.” So I have to concede that their rooms are their domain, but the rest of the house I keep the way that I like, without being too obsessive.’

As a clinical psychologist, she doesn’t need anyone to help her interpret her neat-freak tendencies. They come, she says, not so much from her father’s influence but ‘from a longing for stability. Having had a few traumatic changes – as we all do in our lives – I’ve learnt that calm surroundings can create an inner serenity.’

Four years ago, shortly after her 40th birthday, Miel’s marriage broke down. The divorce was difficult and if the lyrics of her songs are anything to go by, she has found the midlife dating scene hazardous. ‘Bad men/I’ve had enough of bad men/The ones who ignite your fire then let you down’: these are the opening lines of one heartfelt track ►

## MIEL AND MAGGIE'S

Miel is among those actively fundraising for the next Maggie's – a £5 million centre at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London, to be designed by renowned architect Steven Holl.

● Many people come to support cancer charities through a personal connection with the disease. Miel's link with Maggie's is slightly different. Her mother Jacqueline is a friend of Marcia Blakenham, who was the best friend of Maggie Keswick Jencks, upon whose name the charity is founded.

● Maggie was a writer, garden designer and visionary who in 1993 was diagnosed with breast cancer for the second time. She spent the last 18 months of her life creating a blueprint for a unique place where all cancer sufferers could go for information, psychological support and stress-reducing strategies. A year after she died, aged 53, the first Maggie's opened in Edinburgh and today there are 16 similar centres around the UK and abroad.

● All Maggie's Centres are attached to hospitals, but they are the antithesis of clinical environments. There are no reception desks, no signs on doors and no clocks. Each one is individually designed by award-winning architects, but with a common purpose – to feel safe and welcoming. Light, uplifting and more like spacious houses than public buildings, Maggie's Centres received 125,000 visitors last year and directly supported 25,000 people newly diagnosed with cancer.

● With her architectural eye and background as a clinical psychologist, Miel instantly identifies with the Maggie's ethos. 'There are those who say that if you have cancer, who cares what space you have around you? But go in and have a cup of tea and you will see the difference they are making to people's lives,' she says.

● The Maggie's approach is frequently cited as an example of best practice and is commended by the NHS Cancer Plan. [maggiescentres.org](http://maggiescentres.org)



◀ which, she says enigmatically, is about 'disappointment, anger and forgiveness'. Another ballad entitled 'Beautiful You' asks beseechingly, 'You, beautiful you/Wonderful you/Where did you go?'

'I am finding it [dating] hard, probably in an Oedipal way because I so admired my father: And I need to work on my ability to compromise,' she says. A key quality for her is someone who understands creativity. 'I get introduced to a lot of bankers, and it's not that bankers can't be creative, but finding someone who is creative and stable is more difficult.'

On the upside, the sea change in her life has proved a fertile ground for songwriting and led, through a series of happy coincidences, to her newfound career. She performed her first gig at an electricians' ball in Kent after a chance conversation with her Pilates teacher – who also sings in a band – a couple of years ago. 'We were having a laugh and she got me in front of the mic and said, "I think you are good enough."' More performances followed; she began working with a voice coach and then, through a friend of her yoga instructor, met her producer Andy Wright. 'He really gets me – we have these amazing moments

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Miel's repertoire includes her own songs, but also some that her father used to sing to her as a little girl. To this day, she misses him, but she also knows, paradoxically, that it is only without him that she has been able to realise her dream. So what would he think if he could see her now?

'I think he would have been touched and he would have approved,' she says. 'He was very keen that I was always serious about things, but I am working with seriousness and purpose. And my sense is that he would also have been a little softer from beyond the grave. Once he was no longer looking over my shoulder; I like to think he would have understood the choices I've made.' ■ *Miel's album Magnetic will be released later this year, [mielmusic.co.uk](http://mielmusic.co.uk)*

when I give him my songs and he sits at the piano and starts making the chord arrangements, and every time I cry because what comes out is so magical.'

Miel is a great believer in second chances. Indeed, she has just lent her support to the five-day Women of the World Festival at London's Southbank Centre, where speakers included Malala Yousafzai and Shami Chakrabarti. One of the key themes was enabling women to pursue their passions and celebrate their achievements. 'I am experiencing a depth of fulfilment I have never known, and when that happens to you, it is something you wish for everyone,' Miel says.

Her children are bemused but supportive. 'Talia is more of a Selena Gomez fan but sings along to my songs. Zachary is at the "too cool for school" stage, but he likes my music. And my mum is my number-one groupie – she is thrilled to see me doing something I love.' Zachary, her mother and Alain were all in the audience for her St Bartholomew's Hospital gig (although not Talia as 'it was past her bedtime for a school night').