



By ROGER COOMBS

# Beauty lies in greener pastures

Saturday  
interview

**W**est of Cowra, the red dust rises in spiralling columns as hot northerlies twist across the dried-out dams and creek beds. Dead grass crunches under foot, and the locals scan the horizon, hoping for relief, for rain. And it's a long way from Sydney.

Further still from London, from the glittering lights of the West End and the Royal Albert Hall. On opposite sides of the globe, and "opposites" in just about every imaginable way, Cowra and the Albert Hall don't end up in the same sentence all that often.

But there is one in Cowra for whom the Albert Hall holds special and momentous significance — and this year, most especially. For in that lavish place, 25 years ago this month, Sydney girl Belinda Roma Green was crowned Miss World. It was official: at 20, Green was the most beautiful girl on the planet — quite a thing for the skinny kid from Blacktown, the train driver's daughter who entered her first beauty contest on a whim after busting up with her boyfriend.

Now 55, Green looks back on that time, and on the "journey" of her life; from the commonplace hardship of growing up in a broken home, to the stellar heights of international fame and adoration, to motherhood, her own divorce (from advertising guru John Singleton in 1987), her life in and out of the spotlight, to her move from Sydney three years ago to the graceful Glen Echo, the historic homestead on 50ha she now shares with her partner Steve Mason and an assortment of various "pets", including Wal, the young 'roo Green bottle-raised from his infancy.

"It does seem a long time ago [the night in the Albert Hall] and this time 25 years ago, I guess it still hadn't quite sunk in, my feet still hadn't touched the ground," Green says. "I was still in London. I didn't realise I'd have to stay there so long because I hadn't really read the contract properly. I thought it would only apply to the winner, and it hadn't really entered my head that I [might] actually win."

But win she did. That night, the judging panel — which included the

celebrated British actor, Peter Sellers and the absurd Paul Gadd, better known as Gary Glitter — took a shine to "our" Belinda.

And from the moment the tinsel tiara settled on her head, her life was transformed. Back in 1972,

Australian and American troops were still involved in the Vietnam War, and one of Green's first duties was to join a morale-boosting Christmas tour of the war-torn country, entertaining the troops with American comedian Bob Hope.

"Los Angeles, Aleutian Islands, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Diego Garcia, Guam, then back to the States, then back to London — it was pretty wild," she says. "I was cast as the girl-next-door type rather than the hot, hot thing ... it was incredible. I found the trip so emotional, so overwhelming — far more so than winning Miss World. These were kids. They were so young ... they could have been my brothers or my boyfriends. It all seemed so screwed up.



"I have this clear memory of Vietnam on Christmas Day, half way though the tour — there were just hills of GIs' heads going into the distance. In Japan, it was snowing. Soldiers were actually sitting in the snow on the frozen ground."

The memories, Green insists, are happy for her, but she confesses that she "cried a lot" at the time, and does so even today at Christmas as she looks back.

That extraordinary whirlwind of experiences was just the start of what was to be a full year of touring — a year for which Green was not prepared. Back home, she'd left her car in the street, expecting to be away no more than a fortnight.

She missed her mum, big brother Ronnie and her sisters. A long, long way from home — and surrounded by people she didn't know — she was often lonely, even depressed.

When she did get back to Australia a year later, the car had been

towed away. Everything was different. More than most of us, Green was forced by those tumultuous early experiences to be adaptive, to accept and understand change, to try to learn from life along the way.

But Christmas, she says, can still be a tough time for her.

"Now it's emotional for me because Christmas was always with my two children [adult daughters Jess and Sally, whom Green had with Singleton] and I like a traditional Christmas," she says. "I loved it when they were little."

Now, as in many blended families, getting "the kids" together for Christmas can be problematic. Do they go to dad or mum? Inevitably, there are disappointments.

"My first Christmas after our marriage broke up was emotional for different reasons, but we've always shared the Christmases over the years. Now they've grown up... they're still my babies... I miss them," her voice trails off.

It's distance she's talking about — the physical distance, the emotional

distance that every parent of adult children will understand. They grow up, they move away — even if they only live round the corner.

In Green's case, she's at Glen Echo and Sally is in Sydney. Jess is in London. This year she's not sure whether the girls will be around on Christmas Day.

Moving to Cowra from Kirribilli, from the home in which Sally and Jess had grown up, has been something of "a wrench", Green concedes, even though living in the farmhouse, surrounded by green fields (good and recent rains have been a Godsend in the Lachlan Valley) represented the culmination of a dream that she and Mason had shared.

"I was thrilled because Steve wanted the same thing I'd wanted all my life and to find someone who wanted to do it with me — and I thought: 'Yeah, let's get out of here,'" she says.

"I needed the change. The downside is my work has slowed down, even though I've still got a place in Sydney and I still come down, and can still work here. People tend to think you've retired when you move to the country."

But Green is gradually absorbing the contrasts between the fast-paced city life she's traded for the quieter pace of the country.

In her philosophy, reconciling those city-country differences and understanding them is all part of the journey — much like the journey of reconciling oneself to the fact of growing older, looking in the mirror and no longer seeing Miss World but seeing someone older.

"I'm not as confident as I used to be — I've put on a few kilos and it's not as easy to scrub up as it used to be," she says candidly. "But I'm learning to be kinder to myself. Now I'm trying not to be too harsh on myself. I think I've paid my dues."

Helping people — country people, particularly — to come to terms with the processes and problems of age-

ing and of isolation is a project Green has adopted with characteristic zeal. She's also signed up as spokeswoman and ambassador for [foreveryoungclub.com.au](http://foreveryoungclub.com.au) — an on-line meeting site tailored to be a point of contact and a source of social and communal support for the over 50s. All of that helps.

"I'm fortunate," she says. "I have a good network of friends and family and I do have opportunities.

"But there are lots of people who don't have those opportunities, who don't have good support networks.

"After a divorce, or a move, that sort of thing, people can feel very fragmented. There can be ill-feeling and emotional divisions.

"So the idea [of the website] is just to plug people in to each other.

"There are a lot of lonely people over 50, and this [site] is a really good thing. It's a safe way to meet people and to discover common interests.

"People who are getting older might tend to think, 'Oh, who'd want to know me? I'm too old'. Or, 'Who'd want me? I spend all day working on the farm'. The idea is perhaps to link up travel partners, or people who might have the same interests in the garden, or cooking, that sort of thing. Through people you meet other people. The bottom line is connecting people.

"And living here, I had to come to the reality myself that I had to stay in touch, I had to make the effort."

Twenty-five years ago in the Albert Hall, on the night she was judged the most beautiful girl in the world it seemed for Green that a fairytale had come true. But life rarely plays out with storybook perfection. It's not perfect, and happy endings are never guaranteed.

But in Green's considered view of the world, the rewards for those who make the most of life's uncertain journey are huge. "The thing I really like about Cowra is that I don't feel judged at all," she says.

For Green, a good destination.





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Journey . . . Belinda Green as Miss World in 1972; today, older and wiser. *Main picture: CARLOS FURTADO*



## Only the lonely: help online

**A**LTHOUGH she was once Miss World (1972) and married to wild child John Singleton, there have been times in Belinda Green's gorgeous life when she has been lonely.

"When my girls left home and I was alone in the bush there were times when the sense of loneliness was overpowering," she said.

"I have also known the terrible feeling of despair after separation and divorce."

So a year ago she decided to do something about it and formed the Forever Young Club,

an online organisation designed to connect lonely people over the age of 50.

"The death of a spouse, later-life divorce and empty nest syndrome can turn the festive season into a time of loneliness for many," said Belinda.

"But the online social network Forever Young Club ([www.fyc.com.au](http://www.fyc.com.au)) expects to keep thousands of over-50s connected during the club's first Christmas season.

"Remember, you don't get any brownie points for punishing yourself."



Belinda Green .  
online helper