

DENISE "BELLA" VLASIS

The Most Famous Madonna Impersonator is Greek!

*Denise "Bella" Vlasis is half Greek and part Italian and Irish, but feels most connected to her Greek roots. A performer who has a very successful career as a Madonna impersonator, Bella, is not only a Madonna look-a-like, but an author of two books: **Made you Look and You've got the Look, mother, and owner of Tribute Productions. Bella shares her experience of how it is to pretend being the most famous woman on earth, and what it was like to meet the real Madonna while in character.***

Tell us how you got started as a performing artist?

I began dance classes at age 9 and fell in love with the feelings it allowed me to express. Dance allowed me to think, and learn to go outside of my body, it allowed me to express and feel every kind of emotion. Dancing gave my body physical and mental challenges, and it taught me grace, surrender, and peace. After my 1st dance class I knew I wanted to dance for the rest of my life. I was not sure I would have the technique to become a professional dancer, but I did know I would dance in my life. The truest inspiration for all of the performing in my career, is the feelings in my heart when I am dancing. Music & dance,,my truest first loves!

You are the most successful Madonna impersonator. When and how did you discover this talent and how long have you been doing it?

You are very kind and thank you, but I must say there are several really good and talented Madonna Impersonators. I have a few favorites actually but each of us bring something to the table I believe. I began my Madonna career professionally in 1985 and in those days, there were many "fans" and "fanatics" of Madonna and even as a young girl did not fall into that category. I was always a hungry performer just looking for a way to work. I have always respected Madonna as a brilliant artist and business person, but I was never a "fan" or "wannabe" and have never had an illusion of wanting to "be" her. There are many performers who impersonate Madonna for the secret reason of wishing they were her and trying to live a life as that illusion. There are some Madonna impersonators who are great singers and just need a good stage for their "act" and there are others, like myself, who are performers first (acting, dance, chore-



Photo Credit: Alex Vacca

ography, producing) and utilize the similarity "on stage" only. Personally my favorite Madonna Lookalikes are the girl with a little sense of humor, many Madonna impersonators can take themselves too darn serious in my opinion, and dressing like another for a living can be strange and definitely funny! Humor is key!

Have you ever met Madonna while in character?

Yes a few times. I met her the 1st time at her auditions for WHO'S THAT GIRL TOUR. I knew Jeffrey Hornaday (her choreographer) and he asked me to come and audition for her. He instructed me to wear no make-up and cover my hair (short, platinum blond). He wanted her to see me as a dancer first and not be distracted by the lookalike thing. So I actually made it after the first cut (there were many dancers having to do a routine) and they cut about half of them. So the second part of the audition was to free style dance for Madonna. I danced for her and after my audition, Jeffrey had me meet her face to face. She was cordial and professional. She didn't end up hiring any of the dancers at that audition but asked my friend "who was the best street dancer in LA" and he said "Shabbado" and Madonna said "get him on the phone",,,Shabbado ended up as the choreographer of that tour. I had the honor of working with him years later, performing VOGUE at the Beverly Wilshire for a very big fund raiser Produced by Jeff Kutash (Las Vegas Producer-SPLASH).

The second time I met Madonna, I was hired by MTV to be in a commercial WITH her. The Casting Director hired me to work as their professional consultant. I was able to help them with all the Madonna looks, casting the models, and accuracy of details. We were on the set with Madonna and were able to watch her in action. We were warned to "not look at her- or talk to her" but as she passed me she

said "looks good, looks reeeal good".

There is another episode when I was first runner up for her contest on MTV. Out of 2000 videos sent in- my video was hand picked and screened by Madonna- and selected for the contest. In the video I was impersonating all Madonna's looks. I was the only impersonator selected out of the 2000 entered.

You also have an entertainment company, Tribute Productions. Tell us about that?

Tribute Productions was born from my 'always helping other agents find talent'. I was told over and over "Bella you should be paid for what you do" and for many years agreed but did not do anything about it. It's my nature to help people and I love to. I began my agency in about 1997 and it has blossomed into a wonderful company. The opportunities are amazing, and it allows my creative soul to constantly create, which keeps my heart happy! I am able to produce shows, work directly with my choreographers and dancers and costumers. I get to create new characters to pitch and sell to the Entertainment Industry.

My company is specifically known for our Vintage 1940's Cigarette Girls (Ms Bella's Dolls) where I customize each models character and looks. I love the 1930's and 40's so this stemmed from my love of everything Vintage ESPECIALLY the Pin-Up Girls. We also have Big Band Orchestras and Dance Shows, Can Can Dancers, Show Girls, Celebrity Lookalikes, 40's Paparazzi and Fan Clubs, Shows and on and on. I just keep wearing my Creative Cap and helping the company grow and grow. We get calls to provide talent for Corporate Events, Parties, to Television, and Feature Films and Print Advertisement.

What part of Greece are you from?

My Grandfather is from the small seaside of Petras. He came to America

on a boat when he was just a small boy. He was (and still is) my absolute favorite! (My 1st book was dedicated to him as I always made him the promise "Grandpa if I am ever famous you will see your name in lights). He was a very proud and strong Greek and taught my family of the honor to be Greek. I have always been very proud of my Greek heritage (hense I did not loose "Vlasis" because I got married, and as a matter of fact have "Vlasis" on my little girls birth certificate). I AM Vlasis even though I am happily married. I am very proud to be connected to such a deep, rich culture and people. My Papa is a beautiful and proud Greek. Papou, he and my Mother always made sure to culture our family with Greek music, food, and dancing (you should see Theodore Nicholas 1,2 and 3 roll their bellies!) My Mother is an amazing and beautiful Italian and Irish woman, so I am a mixture of all, but have always felt most connected to my Greek roots. I believe it's been in my soul for many life times.

Has your Greek heritage had an influence on your work?

I believe it is my Greek heritage that has drawn me to the arts (after all it IS the Greeks to discover and create I believe)

I have always been drawn to all things Mediterranean in nature, be it music, dance, architecture, colors, people, (men!! love the dark features!). I know there were many times as Madonna I was hired because of my Greek heritage. I have worked with a few Greek Directors who (I believe) hired me because I am Greek. I performed on Greek TV and loved everyone on the set and wished I could go back to Greece with them. Even some of my photo shoots have the look of an Ancient Mediterranean Madonna ,,like I said -Greece is in my soul.

What do you pride most about your work?

I believe my ability to manifest what is in my heart is what I pride most. I believe this comes with the sincerity and passion for pursuing what is true for me. Not from ego or fear or trying to fulfill someone else's dream. But to fully be present and take pride in what and how I do something, all the while being very aware of my "intentions". I am proud of what I have accomplished in my work. Seems like I created the "impossible" some times and being a girl with "ok talent" but not super great- I could never really sing well- and I was ok as a dancer but more than anything my passion and integrity paved an amazing career that has lasted 25 years now. My parents always