Chelsea Everywhere

How the audaciously funny Chelsea Handler parlayed a successful cable talk show into a money-minting media empire. And she's only just begun

By Yael Kohen

Photographs by Peter Yang Fashion editor: Cristina Ehrlich

I'M A LITTLE AFRAID of Chelsea Handler. We're having an early dinner at the Brentwood hot spot Katsuya, and I'm worried that the wrong line of questioning could provoke her to gouge my eyes out with the chopsticks she's using to eat her yellowtail sashimi. A few hours before our interview, I'd read somewhere that Handler was a "mean sober"—for those unaware, she is most comfortable with a highball in hand—never mind her reputation as a blonde barracuda with a razor-sharp mouth. So when she sat down at our corner table and told the waiter she'd be passing on a cocktail this night of all nights, I braced myself for the worst. I even ordered a white-grapefruit Cosmo of my own to help me get through it. (Handler herself inspired the strategy: "I went out with a guy who once told me I didn't need to drink to make myself more fun to be around," she joked. "I told him, 'I'm drinking so that *you're* more fun to be around.'")

But here's the thing: Chelsea Handler is totally not a bitch. In fact, she's beyond lovely—open and warm, utterly unfazed by cringe-worthy direct questions, like when I ask her about the cancellation of her ratings-challenged, critically panned NBC sitcom *Are You There, Chelsea?* ("obviously I care about anything I do, but this was more of a pain in the ass after a while"); or when I inquire about her current boyfriend, hotelier Andre Balazs, of whom she once warned a reporter she would never discuss ("I'm definitely worried about maintaining my relevance and not wanting to go too far out of bounds to accommodate someone else"); or even when I ping her about accusations—courtesy of the original celebrity shit-talker, Joan Rivers—that she "made it on her back, fucking" ex-boss Ted Harbert, current chairman of NBC Broadcasting and former E! Entertainment Television chief who put *Chelsea Lately* on the air ("I so didn't, and I so don't care about you asking about it").

The truth is, allegations that she slept her way to the top are stupid—just look at *Chelsea Lately*'s monster success: Since it debuted five years ago, it's become the most popular late-night talk show among women 18 to 34, a clutch demographic for advertisers; the show has been a veritable cash cow for E!, reportedly generating $40 million in ad revenue a year, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*. Cable, of course, is rife with B-listers who have carved out lucrative niches (*ahem*, Bill Maher). But Handler, 37, has bested them all, leveraging her show's success into an extraordinary media empire that includes a behind-the-scenes postshow called *After Lately*, four best-selling books that have together sold nearly 3 million copies, even her own publishing imprint with Hachette Book Group USA. There are the sold-out comedy tours and a production company, Borderline Amazing, with nine projects in development, including a comedy for MTV and a series about a lippy 12-year-old based on (you guessed it) Handler. All told, Handler has already banked an estimated $22 million from these ventures, plus annual seven-figure payouts. »

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