

"The brash side is all anybody wants to show," says Jaime Pressly. "You know why I haven't volunteered personal information to reporters? Because I know they don't give a damn; they want to keep me where they have me."

Where she is on our first interview is inside her house. It isn't an Airstream. Jaime Pressly answers the door of her Mediterranean revival home in the North San Fernando Valley, holding an English Bulldog and a Boxer by their couture-designer collars. Her around-the-house-casual zippered jacket and drawstring pants give her the look of an off-duty model, and the heavily teased hair she sports on "*My Name Is Earl*" is pinned back with the easy elegance of a Hepburn, not a hardware store pin-up girl.

"Sexy sophistication" is how she describes not just her own style, but also that of her ready-to-wear clothing line J'aime, which debuted in 2005. "Having a child has completely changed everything," she says. "Even if you look at the design of my clothing, it's a whole new collection now. Everything about it is different because it's more conservative, but it still has a sexy sophistication to it. Everything is that way with me since having a baby."

To some celebrities, a clothing line is just a paycheck—an actress's equivalent to a leading man sneaking off on a private jet to do a Japanese beer commercial. But this has never been the case for Jaime Pressly and her California casual line. "I go to the office every week," she says. "Sometimes once a week, sometimes it's three or four days a week. When the show's going on, I have the girls come to me on set. My hands are dirty in every single thing."

Pressly worked in the fashion world as a model for years before she began acting, moving to Japan on her own to pursue modeling at the age of 15. At that same time, she became legally emancipated from her parents, a piece of her bio that has received a great deal of media attention in the past. "A lot of people make a big deal about that," says Pressly. "But it was really just because I was on my own working and traveling so much it just made sense."

On this December evening, Pressly's baby boy is busy steering his way around the living room in what—judging by its tactile gadgetry—must surely be the Escalade of wheeled play chairs (though with a bolder color scheme than the glossy-black, adult-sized one in the carport outside). "This is Desi," she says, as she leans down and kisses his forehead. Her son's name is just the tip of the iceberg of Pressly's lifelong admiration of Lucille Ball. "He looks a lot like his Daddy," she says, as she picks him up out of his chair to hold him. Eric Cubiche is Desi's father and Pressly's fiancé.



Jaime Pressly

THE DUCHESS OF 'EARL'

Her rise to the A-list may have come as a surprise to those who think of her as the quintessential Maxim girl in *Daisy Dukes*. Stinson Carter, however, reveals the smarts and talent hidden behind that sassy gal named "Joy" who millions of beer-swilling viewers know on a first-name basis. "Pass the Pinot, please."



He used to host an FM radio show in Los Angeles, and is now a globe-trotting, “name” deejay. Cubiche explains how the changes in Pressly since she became a mother are reflected in their relationship: “When motherhood came, she elevated my ideal for what a mother should be—unconditional love,” he says. “I have so much respect for her.” Even though they’ve known each other for ten years, Pressly and Cubiche have taken their time with marriage. “Knowing that we’re not married, and that we’re together because we want to be, that’s what makes it great. We’re here because we want to be here. We had a baby because we wanted to have a baby,” she explains. “When you put someone in a straight jacket, especially me in a straight jacket, all I want to do is rip it off and run.” With Pressly, matters of love are weighed by emotions rather than by titles or trappings. Even the diamond now dwarfing her left ring finger comes with a Pressly-esque interpretation: “We got engaged as soon as we found out I was pregnant. And not for anybody else’s sake, but just for the fact that I wanted a ring on my finger to solidify things.”

Pressly pulls two chairs up to the table on her outdoor deck and pours us each a glass of the Pinot Grigio I brought along as a visitor’s gift. “This place could be in North Carolina,” she says, referring to the leafy suburban seclusion of her neighborhood. “I like the Valley because it’s

not a paparazzi haven. I don’t want my son to have flashing lights in his eyes all the time and be afraid of people,” she says. Pressly learned this lesson the hard way, as an episode of MTV’s “*Cribs*”—starring her former beachside home—included an unapproved establishing shot of her house from the street, which initiated a pilgrimage of hormonal teenage boys assailing her front gates, looking for more than an autograph.

But those boys are not alone. When most people think of Jaime Pressly, it’s as the sexy bad girl of her early films such as *Poison Ivy: The New Seduction* (1997), *The Journey: Absolution* (1997), and *Ringmaster* (1998). She is the first one to admit that her past roles have fostered this “bad girl” image. Though she doesn’t exactly embrace her dues-paying roles, she certainly has no problem owning them. “Everything is a stepping stone, and are there any regrets? Sure,” she says to herself. “There’s a bunch of films I wouldn’t have done, and it’s not the nudity or anything like that; it’s just that they’re not great films.” Ironically, her success has extended the life of movies like these. “Once you do a film that does well, all of a sudden people get funding for distribution for that independent film you did eight years ago and then it comes out and you look like an asshole. Instead of one door closes and another one opens, it’s sometimes like one door opens and another door shuts.”

As with her off-the-beaten-track neighborhood, the people she chooses to surround herself with provide her some isolation from the glitz, and snares, of fame. “Every single person around me is a ‘no’ person; I refuse to have ‘yes’ people around me. I won’t sugarcoat anything for you, so I don’t want you to sugarcoat anything for me,” says Pressly. “I mean, I’ve had the same best friend since I was five years old.” That best friend is Katie Allsley, with whom she still has sleepovers whenever she goes back home to North Carolina. “She always was special, and I mean that,” says Allsley. “You know somebody, when they’re a kid they just stand out. She’s a challenge, but that’s what makes her so good at the same time. She fights for every opinion she has.” Pressly makes regular trips back to her hometown of Kinston, North Carolina to visit family, and the town has come full circle with its prodigal daughter. “It’s great going home now,” she says. “But when I did *Playboy*, years ago, not so great.”

“Everybody jumps on the bandwagon when you’ve won something, when you’re hot at the moment,” says Pressly, with cool-tempered Southern sass. “But there are some people that were kind of always there, and somehow I became the underdog that everybody was always rooting for.” She sums up her celebrity with the down-to-earth sense of a front-porch philosopher, saying “Celebrity is only good for two things: Number one, charity. Number two, getting a great table at a restaurant when you have no reservation.” As for the restaurant privileges, she doesn’t even

really need it for the kinds of places she prefers. “I don’t go to places like *The Ivy*; I don’t need all that.”

The notion of anyone (much less, an actor) writing a memoir at 30 might seem premature or even presumptuous. But when Pressly talks about her upcoming autobiography, *It’s Not Necessarily Not the Truth*, she comes across as a natural storyteller many years her senior, who has honed their material around decades of campfires and picnic tables. “Everybody in a place like where I grew up puts on this façade of perfection. They go to church on Sunday, but their breath smells like liquor. They all have demons, everybody’s human, but in small towns there’s nothing to do but get into trouble.”

“Everybody is in the book,” she continues. “We’ve all made mistakes, but we’ve all grown from them.” Her memoir, due out next month, is more than the story of how a gorgeous 15-year-old girl from small-town North Carolina launched her career by secretly submitting pictures to the back page model searches of teen magazines, then worked her way through a decade of pigeonholing “sexy” roles to an Emmy, which she won last year. It’s also a story of an entire family as told by a girl born, as she says, “in a small town with a big city brain.” And it earns its ink on its own merits rather than simply on the book-jacket allure of her name.

The title of Pressly’s book comes from a connection (whether real or imagined) between her and another famous Presley. “When I was a little kid there was a lot of teasing going on about me being related to Elvis,” she says. “I went to my granddad and asked him, Is it true? Are we related to Elvis? And he said that years ago there was a family feud between the Presleys, and half the family changed the spelling. And I said, Really? And he said, ‘I don’t know. What do you think? Whatever you believe is true is true.’ Then I asked my Uncle Tommy about it, and he went and got a picture of Elvis’s dad and my grandfather and laid them down side by side, and they looked like brothers. I’ve never seen anything look so close in my life. Same sideways smile,



same teeth, same eyes. And he said, ‘See? It’s not necessarily not the truth.’”

Jaime Pressly lists Lucille Ball, Whoopi Goldberg, Goldie Hawn, and Katherine Hepburn among her biggest heroes, and she quotes them while citing their strengths as guideposts for her own career. “I’ll be honest with you,” she says. “Before ‘Earl,’ I was ready to call it a day. Because if you’re not going to give me the opportunity to show what I can do, then what’s the point? And then I started thinking...” She pauses. “Katherine Hepburn was blacklisted in Hollywood during the war. So she went to Broadway and did *The Philadelphia Story*. Then she bought the film rights to it, came back to Hollywood, sold the project with herself as the lead and executive producer, and at 21 years old, she won her first Oscar. That’s pretty badass. She was blacklisted, but she was like, Really? Watch this! It’s just fuel for your fire, makes you want to do it even more.” Compounding the problem of the scarcity of weighty female roles is the fierce competition between actresses. “There’s a million women and there’s five roles—two roles—

and they’re not even that great,” she explains. But Pressly stood up to these odds and finally got her chance to buck the blacklist of B-Movie vixen-dom with the breakout NBC comedy “*My Name Is Earl*,” a primetime series about small-time crook-and-general ne’er do well, and Lotto winner, Earl Hickey.

Greg Garcia, the creator of “*Earl*,” now in its third season, was the first Hollywood heavy to recognize what Pressly could really do, and cast her as Earl’s feisty ex-wife, “Joy.” “When she came in and read for the role, the first line was, ‘Who’s the whore?’ and it came out of her mouth and that was it, there was just no question,” he says. “I mean, she had it; she could’ve walked right out after that. She had everything this character needed: She was beautiful, she was funny, and she had balls. She certainly has the range to do whatever she wants.” What she wanted with the character of “Joy” was much more than what Garcia originally created, and it became her own winning Lotto ticket.

“Greg [Garcia] let me run with that character,” says Pressly, “I came into the room with a persona that he didn’t write. He knew what I was doing when he saw it, and he let me do it, let me ‘find’ her. It wasn’t supposed to be such a big role originally. But Greg called me one day and said, ‘We’re gonna start seeing a lot more of you.’ I’ll never forget that,” Pressly says, “because it was the first time any head showrunner, or anybody like that, ever called me and commended me. It had nothing to do with my sex appeal for the first time ever—and that was the greatest thing ever.”



I’m sure more than a few “Earl” fans would take issue with the notion that Pressly’s “Joy” has nothing to do with sex appeal, but the actress took steps to ensure this wouldn’t be her character’s focus. “At first, the costume department had me wearing underwire bras with huge padding and low-cut shirts so my boobs were in my neck,” she says with a laugh. “Not only was it uncomfortable, but I thought, as far as the acting is concerned, I think I’m holding my own. I don’t need all of this.”

From that point on, Pressly made sure the wardrobe suited the character she’d developed rather than just the part she’d originally landed. For a woman who once posed in *Playboy* to take such a stand may seem contrary, if not hypocritical, but it’s not about modesty so much as it is about context. Sexiness is not her biggest weapon, but just another arrow in her quiver.

There is surely no sex factor in her latest role in this month’s Dr. Seuss-inspired animation comedy, *Horton Hears a Who*. “I play Carol Burnett’s best friend,” Pressly says, “a crazy, gossipy sidekick of Carol. I’m the one that flies around her like the little Kibbles ‘n Bits dog that jumped over the big dog. She’s flighty and gossipy, big blue hair. Like a chicken-duck type of thing.”

Her acting options have increased in proportion to her success, but the goal of it all is still what it’s been all along: entertaining people. It’s just that now she’s earned a lot more leeway in terms of how she can do it. “I absolutely love entertaining people more than I can possibly tell you: the power to make people cry, laugh, get pissed off, get scared. Whether it’s for 30 minutes in a TV show, or for two hours in a film, you get to actually hold their attention and make them feel something other than what they were feeling when they sat down and started watching you. That’s so powerful.” And now that she’s entertaining a broader audience, she’s taking stock, and plotting her next step. Says Pressly, “‘Earl’ gave me a voice, and I’m so grateful. But I don’t want to play ‘Joy’ for the rest of my life.”

The traffic-stopping figure she regained so quickly after childbirth is all the proof needed to know, however, that Pressly isn’t about to abandon her bimbo-with-a-quip manqué. But chances are, it will now come with something else, a dose of that “sexy sophistication” she speaks of these days. And if she has her way, it will be enlisted in the service of new and different ends. “I can play the hell out of a drama,” she says, “but somebody’s gotta let me do it.”

Motherhood and success have changed Jaime Pressly. But it’s not the kind of tabloid transformation thrown together by publicists—simply the slow and steady victory of a blond-haired, blue-eyed dark horse. As she looks back on her life so far, both the trademark brashness of a Hollywood bad girl and the underlying sincerity of a Carolina country girl find a place in her words: “Once you’re an adult, you’re responsible for who you’ve become,” she says. “I have a great career, a great relationship, and a beautiful son. I did what I needed to do without compromising who I am and what I believe in. I’m not gonna live my life for other people because I’d be miserable if I did.”