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TV
Q&A

'I FEEL LIKE I WON BECAUSE THE PANEL'S REACTION WAS PRICELESS'

M People star Heather Small talks about lighting up our screens as *The Masked Singer's* Chandelier

January is never the brightest of months, so the return of TV's wackiest show, *The Masked Singer*, is the tonic the nation needs. And when the first episode aired on New Year's Day, M People singer Heather Small became the first celebrity to be identified – despite the 56-year-old disguising her distinctive voice to perform Patsy Cline's *Crazy in the Chandelier* outfit.

Funnily enough, as judges Davina McCall, Rita Ora, Jonathan Ross and Mo Gilligan debated what famous names may be behind the masks, comedian Mo namechecked Heather – but as Lionfish. And the star did such a good job of hiding her identity, one Twitter user wrote, "With a hundred guesses I would never have got Heather Small as Chandelier!"

As well as enjoying a 30-year singing career which has included successful solo albums, Londoner Heather has loved mixing it up over the years. She was in the sixth series of *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2008 and in 2019 she tested her brainpower by taking part in *The Chase*.

And the *Proud* singer will now be showing off her iconic voice on tour, playing across the UK in March and April. Here, she tells us more about her experience on *The Masked Singer*...

Hi, Heather! What was it like hiding your identity backstage?
It's so funny. This is the most surreal part of it because no one

knows who you are. You are always masked – not in your costume but in a balaclava. I don't know what the driver thought! You have more than one identity, so you feel a bit like a spy. Entering that world, it's fun, and there has been an absence of fun for the past two years.

You said you were inspired to take part on the show by the experiences of Joss Stone and Gabrielle in last year's series...
I saw them on TV talking about it and Gabrielle said that she did find it difficult at first but she pushed through and enjoyed it. I thought if singers were saying they enjoyed it, it must be enjoyable. I wanted to see if I could, after 30 years of singing, disguise my voice and put on a different persona, and have that shock of a reveal. I didn't make it to the end but I still feel like I won because the panel's reaction to the reveal was priceless.

How has your mum reacted since finding out you were on the show?

Apparently, she watched it with my sister and as soon as she heard Chandelier singing, she said, "I know that voice." Two weeks ago she said, "Have you been on a TV show and had to hide your identity?" She's like a bloodhound, that woman. Any bags that come into the house, she feels that she's got the right to look in. So I used to say, "Hi, Mum!" Then I'd rush to dispose of the costume that masked my identity going into the studio. She did ask me about four times and



Heather on the show as Chandelier

I had to say to her, "Well, when would I have time to do that?" But there was no fooling her. She was pleasantly surprised, because she likes the show and she was happy I participated. And even though she guessed, she was happy no one else did.

What reactions did your friends and colleagues have to you taking part?

Sinitta was very complimentary and said that she had no idea. I've sung to her up close and personal, and she didn't guess it was me. Other people who are in the business have commented too and I managed to fool them.

When you were first approached to take part in the show, was it something that you said yes to immediately?

I had a little think about it because I don't see it as a singing show, I see it as a guessing game. I didn't want people to think, "Oh, my good grief, that Chandelier is terrible! Chandelier must be a footballer!"

I thought, "Am I going to undo my reputation in an hour's show?" [Laughs] It took some doing, to hide my natural voice, and I did go through a process with the vocal coach. My voice is quite rich and deep, so I tried to use the top of my voice and a more nasally sound that you don't associate me with at all. And then you change your voice and you think, "Am I going to be stuck with Chandelier [as a voice] when I go on tour?!"

Why did you choose Chandelier as your outfit?

I usually wear very form-fitting clothes and high heels – you move in a certain way when you have that kind of attire. I wanted something that I couldn't move too much in, because I have some moves and I know people would think, "That's Heather." I wanted a costume that would restrict my usual movements.

Do you have any suspicions about the other celebrities?

Not a clue. The costumes are so brilliant and when you wear a costume, you take on a persona. I did wonder [about the other celebs], "Have you chosen that because it's more in keeping with who you are? Or have you chosen that because you're more of an introvert?" I did the reverse. I chose something that made me seem more introverted because I am extroverted.

***The Masked Singer*, Saturday, 7pm, ITV**