

## Hardcover: UK

## Technology Reviews

# Diamonds aren't forever

By digging up Shirley Bassey's past, John Williams succeeds only in belittling her remarkable rise to the top

BY PETER CONRAD  
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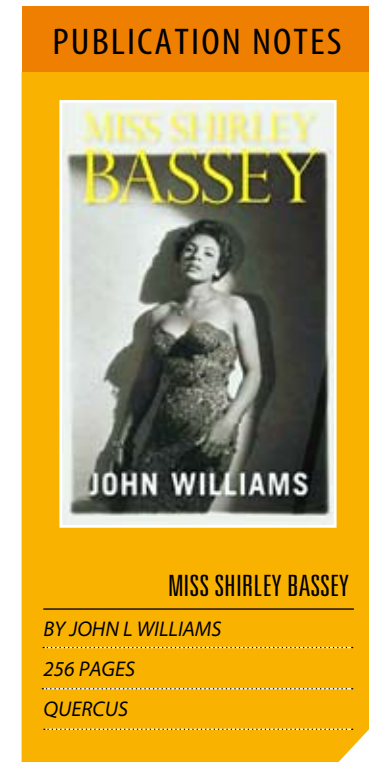
Heaven, if it exists, will probably be like a cheesy repeat of the old TV show *This Is Your Life*, with an archangelic host leading on a troop of doddering former friends to tell comfortable lies about you. Hell, on the other hand, will be like having to read an unauthorized biography of yourself written by a pitiless researcher who has exposed your secrets, reminded you of the hurts and humiliations you suffered, and unearthed the bodies you buried long ago.

"How could you?" a friend of John L. Williams' asked him last year at the Roundhouse, London, where they were both watching one of her spangled, stentorian performances, which naturally ended, after she had belted out the theme song from *Goldfinger*, in a shower of gilded confetti. Defending himself, Williams psychobabbled about the need to face hard truths, as if he were Bassey's court-appointed therapist, charged with getting her to acknowledge the seamy reality of her past — her childhood among the knocking shops of Tiger Bay in Cardiff; her father's imprisonment for raping a minor and his deportation to Nigeria; her teenage pregnancy, and the brisk decision to hand the child over to one of her sisters; her marriage to a frisky homosexual who declared himself "a little baffled" when she announced that she was pregnant again.

How could he indeed? Well, dirt is gold, just as diamonds — just ask Naomi Campbell — begin life as grubby pebbles. Ordure, in a culture that first deifies celebrities and then defiles them, sells at a premium.

The twinge of guilt with which Williams reacted to his friend's accusation does him credit, and he has the good grace to feel sorry for Bassey after he rips off her ostrich plumes. Her family was poor in ways that we can hardly imagine: Shirley wore knickers handed down from her older sisters, ate offal or a simple West African dish called fufu, and bused in pubs for a few bob. When she managed to get regular work, it consisted of placing chamber pots in cardboard boxes with wood shavings as ballast; a later job in a launderette was a definite step up in the world. Even as a theatrical beginner, cast in a down-at-heel minstrel show, she kept a precious packet of biscuits under the mattress to munch when the girls with whom she shared a room were asleep. Her most ardent dream was to be "an air hostess." She might still be only a waitress, but at least she'd have wings.

No wonder Bassey's best-known performances — *I (Who Have Nothing)*, her Bond songs about diamonds and the man with the Midas touch, or the raucous come-on to the big spender from the musical *Sweet Charity* — were anthems in praise of money, belted with a ferocity that came from deprivation and desperate craving. She represents what old-time socialists described as the poverty of



working-class aspirations. At one point her acquisitive fantasy ran to a mews cottage carpeted in mink: "It would be practical in the long run because mink never wears out." When she bought a house near Hyde Park in central London in 1959, she took a journalist on a tour, helpfully informing him that the doorknob cost the equivalent of about US\$2,000 in today's money. She was pathetically proud of her pale-pink sunken bath, fit for the ablutions of some exotic love goddess, and hoped that it would banish memories of the tin tub in the Cardiff kitchen where she used to scrub herself. "I promised myself a bath with taps one day," she said. It's not much to ask for; it's sad, in fact, that she asked for so little.

Unfortunately Williams doesn't stick with Bassey for long enough to reveal whether her luxurious plumbing made her happy. He abruptly breaks off in 1969, when she was only 32, reasoning that the rest of the story will consist of repetitive sessions in recording studios and supper clubs. His failure to see the biography through betrays an uncertainty about what kind of book this is — a documentary novel, as in a strange chapter that purports to be the woozy monologue of Bassey's suicidal husband as he overdoses on barbiturates, or a sociological treatise about the strains of being black in the monocultural Britain of the 1950s, as in the sheaf of scholarly appendices with which it ends?

There may be another reason for Williams' premature abandonment of Bassey's life. Perhaps he calculated that, by exhuming so much of her grim and ugly past, he had killed her off. Showbiz biographers have the Midas touch in reverse: They turn tinsel into sawdust, and rebury diamonds in the dirt.

## SOME SLEEK WOODEN SPEAKERS FOR YOUR EARS

Students used to go to college with an enormous pair of stereo speakers housed in wood cabinets. Back then, most speaker makers favored wood because it radiated a rich, warm sound.

Now several companies offer wooden earbud headphones, claiming that they recreate that natural resonance for iPods and other portable audio devices. Can it possibly work?

It did in a pair of Rain headphones from Thinksound (US\$100, but you can get them for US\$59.12 at Amazon). They deliver a balanced, natural resonance that is lacking in many headphones for portable audio players. The Rain earbuds use a 9mm driver and fit snugly in your ear to create passive noise reduction that filters out ambient noise. (Thinksound provides four sets of silicone ear inserts to ensure a good fit for a range of ear sizes.)

The in-ear headphones are quite compact and have a simple, elegant design in two finishes: black chocolate and silver cherry. One of the company's founders, Aaron Fournier, was previously a lead audio engineer for Tivoli Audio, and the headphones look like portable cousins of the company's hardwood table radios.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THINKSOUND

## A WII-FRIENDLY DRAWING TOOL FOR THE VERY YOUNG ARTIST

The versatile Wii Remote can be snapped inside a steering wheel or guitar, so why not a graphics tablet? The uDraw GameTablet (US\$70) offers a 4-by-6-inch drawing area that children can use with the Wii to draw pictures in charcoal or opaque water colors.

This is no Wacom tablet. There's a slight lag when splotching paint, and you can't import digital photos. But you can control things like the opacity of lines and the level of paint drop-off. The tablet, which runs on included uDraw Studio software, lets the artist zoom in to create fine detail.

It exports projects in JPG format to an SD memory card, and there's a mesmerizing replay feature that reviews paintings, one stroke at a time. So if your children don't like what's on TV, they can draw their way.

Planned for release in November, the tablet is part of a series that the game publisher THQ hopes will transform living rooms into artist studios. Two other US\$30 titles include Pictionary, where you sketch clues, and Dood's Big Adventure, where you draw and tilt through game levels.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THQ

## HOME SECURITY WEBCAMS, AFFORDABLE AND SIMPLE

Logitech has a line of new home-monitoring Webcams, available next month, that are easy to set up and deliver high-resolution video for a consumer-level camera. The cameras come in two versions — the US\$300 Alert 750i Master System for indoor use and the weatherproof US\$350 Alert 750e Outdoor Master System. Once the "master" camera is installed, up to five more cameras can be installed at a cost of US\$230 each for indoor and US\$280 each for outdoor models.

Each camera comes with its own networking kit, which uses existing electrical wiring and outlets to connect the camera to a home network. They require broadband Internet.

The cameras capture video at a resolution of 960 by 720 pixels at a maximum 15 frames a second.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LOGITECH

They have motion sensors and dispatch an e-mail alert when they detect activity. The live video, but not recorded events, can be viewed via a secure, and free, Web site.

The cameras also have a built-in microphone. Setup is a simple three-step process. After installation, the camera records video to an included two-gigabyte MicroSD memory card when it senses motion.

The recorded video is automatically backed up to the PC connected to the network.

## PUTTING COLOR IN AN E-READER

Dedicated e-readers, like Amazon's Kindle, Barnes and Noble's Nook and Sony's Reader, have one thing in common: They all use black and white screen technology from a company called E Ink. That's one reason a company called MerchSource thinks it has a shot at grabbing some e-reader market share. The company announced this week its full-color e-reader, the Literati, which is expected to go on sale in October.

MerchSource develops and sells products under well-known brands, including Animal Planet, Emerson and Vivitar. For the Literati, the company struck a licensing deal with The Sharper Image. The Wi-Fi-only Literati costs about US\$159 including a case, US\$20 more than Amazon's 6-inch Kindle Wi-Fi model. The device, powered by Kobo's e-book engine, has two million titles available through Kobo's library.

MerchSource wants to make this simple for consumers, so it preloads 25 public domain books onto the device before purchase, and provides a coupon code to download an additional 125 public domain titles at no cost.

The 7-inch LCD screen is bright, with saturated colors. But the battery provides only about six hours of use.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MERCHSOURCE

## AT US\$200, THE ECHO BETTER NOT BE AN ORDINARY PEN

It's the kind of pen you'd expect James Bond to use on the renewal form for his license to kill. It's got a camera inside, and a microphone, and it costs a small fortune, as pens go. But the Livescribe Echo isn't designed for secret agents. It's for doctors, lawyers, and diligent college students, and maybe even the occasional well-heeled journalist.

This US\$200 pen, which went on sale last month, is a revealing example of what can happen when you take one of life's most mundane devices and slip in a few microchips.

Livescribe squeezed a processor, 8 gigabytes of memory, and an organic light-emitting diode screen into a pen not much bigger than a Sharpie. It's an innovative effort to apply digital technology to the

analog task of taking notes.

The company claims it has sold half a million of its pens in the past two years — mostly, an older, cheaper model called the Pulse. About a third of all buyers are students; the rest are business people who can ill afford misunderstandings caused by badly scribbled notes. With an Echo, you can make sure you got it right.

Say you are scribbling away during a sales presentation. The Livescribe Echo's camera, mounted near the pen's tip, captures an image of your handwriting. At the same time, it is making an audio recording of the words you are hearing. And the pen's processor synchronizes the audio to the written text.

The pen can read what you write — it even deciphered my handwriting, which isn't easy.

After the meeting, tap the pen on one of your written notes, and hear a clip from that moment. No need to replay the whole recording to double-check a questionable note on page three; just tap and listen to the part that matters.

Next, plug the Echo into a Windows or Macintosh computer and install its desktop software. Up pops a digital image of your handwritten notes. You can convert the image to a standard PDF file and e-mail it to colleagues, along with the audio recording. You can even combine them in a single file called a "pencast," in which your notes appear in sync with the audio playback.

Like a smartphone, the Echo runs apps, or mini-programs that you can buy at the Livescribe Web site. The most impressive ones are the dictionaries.

Can't remember the meaning of the word "syzygy"? Write it down and launch the American Heritage English Dictionary. A digital voice will pronounce the word, while its definition scrolls through the digital display on the side of the pen. Now switch to the Spanish dictionary. Write an English word, and tap. Up pops the Spanish translation, written and spoken.

Limitations? Afraid so. The Livescribe is just another pen unless you write on a special paper covered with almost invisible dots. It's the dots that the camera reads, not the ink on the page. The pages also contain visual command icons that must be tapped to launch the pen's various features.

You can print your own special dot paper using ordinary copy paper, if you own a color laser printer. An inkjet won't do. Luckily, dot paper isn't hard to find. A four-pack of large notebooks sells for US\$20.

In addition, the Echo's microphone needs work. It clearly picks up the sound of the pen scratching across the paper, but sometimes doesn't do as well with human voices. A Livescribe executive said an optional US\$30 external microphone solves this problem, though I haven't tested it for myself.

And of course, there is the price. It's not so bad, given the Echo's remarkable features. But I lose several pens a week and would hate to misplace one that costs as much as a good cellphone. But then, I am not Livescribe's target market. I am too absent-minded. The Echo, while not perfect, is a pen for perfectionists.

— NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

## Softcover: Hong Kong

# Mind your manners, and your mother

Part memoir, part self-help manual, Betty Jamie Chung's book offers a modern take on Confucian traditions

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Taiwan and Hong Kong have always had a lot in common, and one reason is that both places received a huge influx of China's educated classes in the years following 1949. People who had been running a vast country found themselves instead running a large island and a rocky islet, respectively. Irrespective of one's political position, the contribution of these refugees should not be underestimated in considering the subsequent histories of both places.

This book is a set of essays on how to live the good life, mostly taking its examples from the author's own family history. In the 1930s Betty Chung's family was important in Republican Nanjing, her father the youngest senator in the legislature and her mother a senior librarian and emerging feminist. They moved to Canton (now known as Guangzhou) after the Japanese assault on Nanjing in 1937, and then, after several other moves, to Hong Kong in

May 1949. In 1966 Betty Chung's parents moved over to Taiwan where her mother was the Canton City Representative in the National Assembly, in the days when it still claimed to represent the whole of China, until her death in 1978. Betty didn't go with them, however, but went instead to Canada to study for a doctorate in psychology.

Although described as "recipes from my mother", i.e. the Taipei legislator, these chapters really represent Betty Chung's own philosophy of life. Nevertheless, her mother was an unusual woman, more independently minded than most women of her era and class, combining this sense of freedom with what she perceived to be the best elements in traditional Confucianism. She was no Simone de Beauvoir, in other words, but a sage and astute individual in her own right.

But when I first sat down to read *Life Recipes From My Mother*, I was somewhat taken aback to find an early chapter on the importance of table manners.

It was a long time since anyone I knew had valued, or even expressed, a belief in the existence of, such things. But I warmed to the book later, and was surprised to find I could agree with its author on a number of matters.

Even so, you won't find anything radical here, far less any injunctions to, say, break the law. Instead, it's a measured look at Confucian tradition, especially with regard to the family. If you want to sum it up in a few words, you could say that what this book argues is "Confucianism? Well, yes and no."

To give an example of Chung's qualified support for Confucian traditions, she asks whether we should respect our parents and obey them in every particular. Her answer is that we should always respect them, but only obey them selectively. She gives as an example an uncle of hers who as a boy was a musical prodigy, but was forced by his father to follow the family tradition and become a doctor. The result was that he was

## PUBLICATION NOTES



LIFE RECIPES FROM MY MOTHER:  
TIMELESS LESSONS FOR LIVING A  
CONTENTED LIFE

BY BETTY JAMIE CHUNG

252 PAGES

HAVEN BOOKS

never truly happy for the rest of his life.

Westerners living in Chinese societies are often astonished by how parents treat their children. There's a lot in this book about the parent-child relationship, with the emphasis often on allowing children more freedom than is traditional given, particularly when it comes to artistic offspring and to education. The author is aware, for instance, that a PhD was often considered a surplus requirement for a woman in Chinese society, and she mentions the belief that too much education could make her unmarriageable. But her parents were never typical merchants, even though they'd made their fortune in the salt business. When her father finally moved to Hong Kong, for example, all he really cared about taking with him were his books.

Chung also stresses the importance of loving oneself, citing an aunt who, despite having studied law in the UK and married a very rich Englishman,

committed suicide in her 30s. The reason, Chung concludes, was that she'd spent her brief life only in the service of other people, and as a result had never known any real contentment.

My own attitude toward my family is that I can't get far enough away from them. This is the very opposite of Betty Chung's approach. In her recollections — and this book constitutes a sort of truncated autobiography — family members are always giving each other advice, discussing the rights and wrongs of relatives' actions, and worrying over the financial repercussions of their various decisions.

My own key beliefs, by contrast, include that we're a part of nature and so should do our best to bear our fruit like all other organisms; but that humans have long adapted just about everything they've inherited so ideas of "natural" and "unnatural" now don't have much meaning. So bearing your fruit not only means child-bearing but also climbing

a mountain, tending a garden, teaching other people's children, or keeping clear of children altogether and studying algebra. In addition, being generous to those whom the chances of life have brought you into contact with seems important. Schemes for caring for the whole world are beyond my reach, but on the other hand caring only for family members appears unnecessarily unimaginative.

But what this book proves to me is that different sets of values can be simultaneously legitimate. Betty Chung's attitudes are very admirable. They represent her class and are partly the result of her upbringing. Mine, by contrast, represent a different temperament and a different life story. Neither of us is an original thinker, perhaps, but our attitudes appear somewhat orthodox and somewhat unconventional, respectively, because we've trodden different paths. If mine has been a road less traveled by, it hasn't necessarily made all that much difference.