

# In It For The Long Haul

*Melissa Joan Hart's steadfast passion and New York grit have yielded her a 35+ year career in entertainment, thirteen-year marriage, two businesses... and she's not done yet*

Words by Vanessa Pascale

**B**undled up in a coat, blonde locks resting atop a light blue scarf looped around her neck and a backpack slung over her shoulder, Melissa Joan Hart looks very much like a New Yorker as she walks into Bistango at The Kimberly Hotel in Manhattan. You would never suspect that Melissa was born-and-raised in Smithtown on Long Island, since she lost her accent at the age of 13 by repeating the phrase “calling all dog daughters” for days, while acting in an Off-Broadway play, to achieve the “stripped-down, nonregional diction” that has been natural to her ever since—which she mentions in her book *Melissa Explains it All: Tales from my Abnormally Normal Life*.

Melissa, who resides in Connecticut's suburbs, has set up a string of meetings in the city today since she won't be back for awhile—tomorrow, her husband, Mark Wilkerson (Course of Nature front man/guitarist), is having back surgery and she will be busy nursing

him back to health. “I'll have four babies at home,” she says with a smile. In addition to her new role as nurse, Melissa wears several hats: mom, wife, director, author, producer, entrepreneur, and of course what we know her best as, actress.

The long-established thespian makes her silver screen return April 1<sup>st</sup> as the lead in *God's Not Dead 2* with Jesse Metcalfe, Robin Givens and Ray Wise. “It was a really fun production to work on... These movies always seem to come up last minute, so you have about 30 seconds to change your entire life and figure out what you're [her family] going to do for five weeks, while you go somewhere else.” While she filmed in Little Rock, Arkansas, Mark took their three boys (Mason, 10, Brady, 7, and Tucker, 3) to his parent's home in Alabama for a mini vacation. “This movie was a big decision in my life. I felt very called to do it. I'm a Bible-study-Christian-girl, so that wasn't a far reach for me to want to do a movie like this. And coming off the success of the first one, I thought it would be a great career

Photo Credit Steve Fischer

## A Fearless Leader

“There are a few things I like to think of myself: I like to think of myself as fearless. I say yes to everything. The people that work with me are there to help me say no, because I’ll be like, ‘Sure, let’s do it!’ I also think of myself as very honest. I won’t promote something that I don’t really believe in. The fearless thing goes along with voicing my opinion and feeling like I don’t have to hide who I am. Like, I can be a Republican, but I could also be for gun control. I feel like in this day and age you get so persecuted for saying, ‘I like the color blue,’ ‘cause someone’s going to come out and say, ‘What’s wrong with orange?’ I take pride in what I feel, what I’ve learned, and my values and things that I hold dear.”

opportunity... A lot went into that preparation and getting ready for the movie --I had a great time.”

Our waiter comes by and Melissa orders an iced tea and margarita flatbread. “I know that it’s going to get a lot of interesting feedback, on this in particular, but I think that it was an important project for me to be a part of. It was exciting to be in a feature film again after a long time on television... I got to do some stuff I haven’t done in a long time... a lot of fear of getting through some of the dramatic elements. But I felt like I really dove into it and started to trust myself again in that area. So as an actor, I was pretty proud of myself.” Like *God’s Not Dead*, “someone is being persecuted because of their beliefs and then overcoming that,” she tells me. Melissa hopes to bring a screening of the film to her church in Connecticut as well as to her in-law’s church in Alabama.

Born on Easter, April 18<sup>th</sup>, this year Melissa celebrates her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. “Nutrisystem (who she’s been working with) wants to throw me a party, because they’re so excited I’m 40 and feeling better and looking better than I’ve ever looked.” Known for her extravagant-party-throwing-skills, Melissa has a few ideas in mind, either a big girl’s trip to an island, a party in either Lake Tahoe (where their vacation home is) or Panama City Beach (where her in-laws have a house), or somewhere in rural Connecticut. Before Mark’s surgery, Melissa planned a last-minute weekend escape for them to Winvian Cottage --a luxury resort with 18 different themed cottages in Connecticut-- since her in-laws were in town. “You can have a party there -- s’mores and hot air balloon, so I have all these thoughts,” she says, her beautiful face all aglow.

This past August, *Melissa & Joey*, the ABC Family television show that Melissa executive produced and starred in as Mel Burke alongside Joey Lawrence, for the last five years aired their final episode. “It was such fun and people did love it. I knew it was good when my husband would watch it. He has never watched anything I’ve ever done! Like nothing. He’s never read my book... I was like, ‘Oh, you’re watching it without me, that means you actually like it --a nice little badge of honor.” She smiles proudly. With ABC Family becoming Freeform, the network decided not to renew the show. The whole network is getting a revamp, she tells me. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so sad, maybe the first time I knew *Clarissa* was ending... The cast was so fun. We had such a great schedule. It was the ideal job in Hollywood. We were able to break all kinds of barriers: Be the first successful comedy on the network. The first one to pioneer Netflix. It ran its course and was ready to be done.” Melissa is sad about its end, but happy that she no longer has to jet back and forth, from



Photo Credit Ashley Batz

the east coast to L.A., anymore. Of all her notable characters including, Clarissa Darling (*Clarissa Explains It All*) and Sabrina Spellman (*Sabrina, The Teenage Witch*), Mel was her absolute favorite.

Have the boys watched mommy’s shows? *Melissa & Joey* is “a little too racy” for them, but she would let them watch *Sabrina and Clarissa* --though they’re not really interested right now, she shares. Recently, she picked up the *Sabrina* box set. “I figure that’s probably something I should have. *Clarissa* is not on DVD. I think it’s only on Netflix or Hulu now.” Is there one character you’re recognized more for? “I get a lot of Clarissa fans, a lot of Sabrina fans, but I would say more Clarissa, unless they’re international, then it’s Sabrina... I’m so sick of the guessing game ‘cause I play it every day, all the time. Which is like, ‘You know who you look like?’” Sometimes she’ll throw them off and reply, “Sarah Michelle Gellar?” Then, there are those that audaciously demand for her to prove it by showing them her ID. “I’m like ‘I gotta go.’ I just love it when people come up and say, ‘I loved your work’ or ‘I loved you in bababababa’ -- that’s really sweet and I really hold on to those moments.”

Her flatbread arrives. “I haven’t eaten lunch,” she says, after offering me some and picking up a piece. A few weeks ago, Melissa posted a “Wayback Wednesday” photo of her childhood headshots to her Instagram. “Yeah, I was a munchkin,” she says between bites. Since her first commercial at 4-years-old, Melissa has been steadily working in the entertainment business from acting in commercials, television, movies like *Drive Me Crazy* and *Holiday in Handcuffs*, performing in plays, and showing off her moves on *Dancing with the Stars*. How have you been able to keep your career going for so long? “Before I came to meet you, I was with two different agencies trying to figure out what’s next? And how do I continue to grow and be? I just want to be a working actor,” she says. This is the mentality that New York actors and artists subscribe to, she tells me. “They don’t want to be famous. They don’t want to be rich. They want to be working actors and they want to make a career out of this... It’s about doing the work, being the actor, being on stage, getting the applause and that’s more important for a lot of New York actors than getting a paycheck. It’s about being able to sustain that and reinvent yourself. Actors don’t want to play one character; they want to play a million different characters. You want to be remembered for your whole body of work,” she explains passionately.

Throughout her career, Melissa has been a fixture on family-oriented networks and involved in projects where she’s playing the wholesome, good-girl-next-door type, which is why she’s itching to play the antagonist or a badass heroine like *The Hunger*



## TV Time

“We’re still watching reruns of *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *Rules of Engagement*, *How I Met Your Mother*. We recently became fans of *Kimmy Schmidt* a few months ago. We were obsessed with *Friday Night Lights* --that really changed our marriage. But I don’t watch TV without him [Mark], otherwise I’m just watching the news or I’m reading or I’m organizing. I’m always throwing parties and starting businesses.”

Photo Credit Steve Fischer

*Games*’ Katniss, or a character in a Jane Austen-type film. “I went to school at NYU and I grew up in St. Marks Place, I always wanted to be a skater-girl or a goth-girl, but it was just too much work to paint your nails all the time. And all that eye makeup! I just couldn’t do it. I’m such a blonde that dying my hair jet-black wouldn’t work. I’d have to dye it once a week or I’d look like I was going bald.” If you read Melissa’s candid book, you’d find that she’s not as innocent as we all thought – in it she dishes on her partying days, Hollywood hookups –she even owned a nightclub-lounge spot at one point. You might also be surprised to hear that she admittedly has a potty mouth. “I grew up in New York and growing up on set too, you just grow up with a real potty mouth.”

These days, casting directors are having a little trouble figuring out where to cast the pretty, petite, blonde, blue-eyed actress. “I’m at the age where most play *The Mom*, but I think a lot of people think I look too young to play the mom of anyone that’s not really young. But people know my age, so they get confused about where to put me. They want me to come and read for the part of Mom of Teen, but when they see me they go, ‘Oh, never mind.’ And I always know that, so I try to say, ‘You want me to play the younger role.’ ‘No, we know your age.’ So I get stuck in this weird place.”

What truly surprises her most is that having a known name in Hollywood has been more of a hindrance than help. “As much as people think it opens doors, and I have a fan base that loves and will back me no matter what, Hollywood doesn’t like it. They will typecast you and put you into a box and say, ‘I want the new, fresh, hot thing....’ Unless your name is Angelina Jolie, you’re pretty much going to have to fight an uphill battle with people that just don’t think you’re right for that role. And a lot of the time, you don’t even get in the door for an audition because people say ‘no’ at the sight of your name on their paper. I’ve had three title characters in long-running sitcoms and I *still* have a hard time with getting an audition.” When Melissa is not appearing in television shows and films, she’s channeling her energy into other creative outlets.

As the daughter of entrepreneurial parents, and because she was constantly being asked to be the face of other brands, the mother of three boys decided to create a boys clothing line, King of Harts --which she runs with her husband, and only three other employees. “I’ve always been interested in the business world... I didn’t know how to start, so I got designers and people around me that knew what they were doing. Made a lot of mistakes. Slowly but surely, we’re working through and really building our identity as a brand.” King of Harts will slowly transition from only boys clothing to include t-shirts

for girls this spring, and eventually become a t-shirt company focusing on graphic tees. “That’s the area I feel is really lacking and the place where moms will actually devote some time and energy into their kids’ wardrobe... If we can have it reasonably priced -- that’s the hard part.” Over the past year, Melissa has learned a lot, and while it’s been difficult they are dedicated to seeing it thrive.

There’s also a family docu-series, *Sweet Harts*, in development. The show will follow Melissa and her siblings (Melissa is the oldest of eight) as they open up another Sweet Harts candy store. (The first Sweet Harts, which has closed, was opened in Los Angeles with partners.) “It was a terrible location. We had all these problems. I finally feel like I’m ready to do it again, but this time with my family. And in the vein that *Wahlburgers* is boys and burgers and stuff. We want to do --my brother too, but mainly my sisters-- candy in a beautiful -- it will be prettier than *Wahlburgers*.” After our interview, Melissa is headed to a meeting to figure out when and where the TV show will air.

Working with family is something Melissa has done throughout her life. She was raised in the suburbs and grew up with a solid foundation, around those who supported her unconditionally. And this is exactly what she is showing her family and giving her boys. At the base of the foundation is her grounded marriage. This July, Mark and Melissa celebrate their 13th wedding anniversary. What’s the secret to a successful marriage? “Sticking to it, other than that, there’s really no secret. You want to start with someone that you trust explicitly and have fun with because if you’re not having fun, it’s going to suck. My husband and I didn’t know each other very long [about a year] before we got married. And I feel like if we didn’t make that commitment of just sticking it out, we would’ve gotten divorced twenty times. You work through the hard parts and that’s what makes it better. Right now, we’re really having a good time. Last summer, we had a really hard time, but we made it through that and we’re better than ever.” **ML**

Keep up with Melissa on Twitter and Instagram: @MelissaJoanHart and her website [www.kingofharts.com](http://www.kingofharts.com)

## Spin, Spin, Sugar

“I love spinning; I think I feel like I’m in a dance club every time. It feels like an outlet for me, especially as Suburban Mommy right now. I like to get into my spin class and go crazy to music. I love to sweat. I love that it’s dark. I love to scream. I can cry. I can do whatever. It’s the only place I hear new music. I don’t listen to the radio, on my play list I’ll listen to Macklemore, Lynrd Skynyrd, and 90s rock.”