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Daniela Sea: new on *The L Word*

She walks a neat tightrope between trans boi Max and stone butch Moira. But is *The L Word's* Daniela Sea selling out to big-time fame or keeping it real? JOANNA WALTERS finds out

The scene was quite something: a large synagogue on New York's Lower East Side converted into an arts centre, and a pretty queer marching band, dolled up like toy soldiers, parading, parping tubas and whatnot.

A substantial crowd of the glamorous, the camp, the haughty, the deliciously gender-indeterminate and New York's most famous cuddly drag king, MC Murray Hill, gradually hushed in anticipation.

Then, onto the stage strode a woman who's showbiz title is Six Foot Bitch. Sporting green and pink dreadlocks, a plunging neckline and a microphone, she towered over the boy-like figure of film director John Cameron Mitchell – in long socks and shorts – as, back-to-back, they burst into a shattering rendition of 'Ca Plain Pour Moi'.

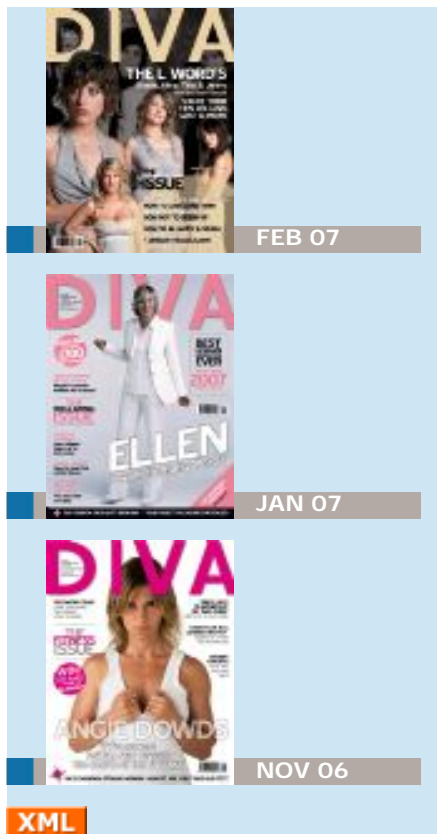
Daniela wishes there were a few genuine butch lesbians on *The L Word*

Accompanying them on keyboards, off to one side and grinning sardonically as she likes to, was up-and-coming *L Word* actor and girlfriend of Bitch Daniela Sea.

The ridiculously fun spectacle ended with Mitchell throwing himself on the floor as this triumvirate of kooky characters lapped up applause from a crowd buzzed on free vodka cocktails and strawberries dipped in a chocolate fountain.

This wasn't your usual post-film première party. Mitchell had just debuted his off-the-wall successor to *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Shortbus*, in which characters spend most of their time either cringing over sexual hang-ups or throwing themselves into orgies in a non-too-subtle metaphor for the desperate search for edge and the meaning of life in post-9/11 New York.

Orgy-acting extras were dubbed 'sextras', while the main characters are a straight couple and a gay male couple. The lesbian content (in which Bitch and Daniela get to appear in one brief scene) involves all the dykes hiding in a back room at the orgy, typically talking about sex rather than actually doing it.



Mitchell's proud of the fact that his actors in the sex scenes actually had sex for the cameras. He asked Bitch and Daniela if they would, but they declined. 'They're lovely, but they're old fashioned,' he told DIVA with an affectionate chuckle.

About three years ago, when wandering artist Daniela decided she wanted to get into acting again, she sent Mitchell her picture in preparation for trying out for *Shortbus*. Bitch was in the picture too, and Mitchell hired them both. Bitch had already split from her ex-girlfriend and musical collaborator, Animal. She and Daniela had fallen in love, and shortly after Daniela got hired for *The L Word*, using her small role as 'The Little Prince' in *Shortbus* to bolster her CV.

Now they're blossoming as the newest edgy, punky, hippy, arty, very-out, political, activist, creative famous lesbian couple – and gradually emerging as the other side of the Lesbian Power coin from indispensable mainstream stealth-envoy couple Ellen DeGeneres and Portia De Rossi.

Neither Bitch nor Daniela is hacked off that their scene in *Shortbus* is short – they seem to accept that's predictable. Besides, it's been useful for them and is a memorable scene in itself.

The main protagonist in the film, a shy straight woman, bursts in through the door, rather shaken after having run the gauntlet of so many... 'Men?' offers Bitch. The character nods in relief. 'Hi, I'm BITCH,' Bitch adds playfully, further unsettling the woman just when she thought she'd landed among nurturing sisters. That's not an untypical part of Bitch's real identity anyway.

She adopted the moniker in 1997: 'Bitch is a word that's commonly used to degrade women. So, in the tradition of "taking back" words, I named myself that,' she says. She also often calls herself Capital B, partly because 'it gets annoying introducing yourself at parties, and some dude always saying, "oh and I'm asshole",' she says. Daniela generally calls her 'B' and she calls Daniela 'D' in a relationship in which each seems very much at ease, but also stimulated by constantly bouncing ideas off the other.

In the film, the lesbians in the orgy anteroom are talking about orgasms and Daniela's character, Little Prince, gets to describe her best ever. 'It's like talking to the gods,' she says.

Sitting now sipping tea outside a little French cafe on the Upper West Side near the nearby apartment they share, they gossip and discuss the film, including the bit about doing live sex.

'We would've done it [had sex] if there'd been a story line around it,' says Bitch. 'But just to do it anyway would've been gratuitous,' Daniela chips in.

They had both flown in for the premiere from Vancouver – their other home these days – where Sea had a few days' break from filming Season Four of *The L Word*. She flew back again shortly after sitting down with DIVA, while Bitch stayed in New York, ready to launch her new album, *Make This, Break*

This. She will tour shortly with the Indigo Girls and hopes to hit the UK next spring to unleash the latest version of her brand of half-spoken, half-sung poetic power lyrics. They mix easy-access activist politics about women's rights, the environment and Bush's America (and sometimes heartbreak) with her favoured partnering of violin and guitar.

In gigs these days, and when not filming, Daniela sometimes accompanies on keyboards and vocals, taking a role she cheerfully admits is deliberately minimalist. She didn't play on Bitch's solo album, and in the past has mainly been her girlfriend's roadie.

When they met about five years ago, Daniela had been living for years as a 'travelling anarchist', mooching around Europe, practising communal living and crashing in squats. Bitch says D really struggled with the idea of a more settled lifestyle and 'capitalist existence' when she returned to America. 'When I met Bitch, I told her "I'm never going to make any money. This is who I am. I live life as an art form",' says Daniela.

The Upper West Side is normally associated with yuppie couples with apple-cheeked babies in expensive buggies, but Bitch and Daniela live towards the Harlem end, where they stand out just enough (but not too much) from the culturally-mixed neighbourhood, in hip, punky T-shirts and – a concession to minor celebrity, surely – large fancy sunglasses on this bright autumn morning.

Now Daniela is becoming quite famous via her quirky L Word character Moira-transitioning-to-Max, and she's probably earning more money than she ever did in her worst nightmares. Bitch is on the up but nothing splashes like TV, so Daniela is often recognised by strangers on the street.

'It's odd; friends are asking me, "Is this hard for you?" [Daniela suddenly being well known], but, you know, being famous has never been our goal – otherwise I'd be trying to get signed by Warner Brothers or something,' laughs Bitch. Many L Word fans are upset that the show hasn't got a real butch character – all the lesbians are so damn girlie or posh, even Shane. Then, as soon as butch hick Moira turns up, instead of being the show's proud butch she decides to take testosterone, raise money to chop her breasts off and becomes a rather aggressive little he-tyke called Max.

Daniela said she's happy with her character's story line as a trans boi but wishes there were a few genuine butch lesbians on the show as well.

As for Max's increasingly violent tendencies, Daniela revealed she's effectively had a running battle with the writers. She's managed to get them to tone down Max's stereotypical macho crap in some scenes, but there was one scene (she grabs her lover Jenny's arm aggressively) in which she had no choice. 'I was told that was part of my job, and that I needed to make it work,' she says. Such is the tightrope walk between soap opera and lesbian showcase that, in some ways, gives The L Word such wide appeal.

Max is an awkward character, often uncomfortable to watch, and Daniela is such a new personality on the acting scene; it's intriguing, wondering how

good an actor she really is. We'll need to see her in other, very different roles to be able to answer that.

Sea admits there's a rawness to her acting and a strong element of herself in it, even if she and Max, with his repressed anger, are quite different people. 'I'd like to see... [how I act in other roles]. There's the Meryl Streep and then there's the River Phoenix – one chameleon, one more... Take James Dean; he's so hard to watch. You don't know if that awkwardness is him or the character. But, yeah, I feel confident that I can act,' says Sea.

Both artists try to walk a line between cutting it in the tough music and acting businesses and selling out. Daniela used to hang out with anarcho-popsters Chumbawamba in Leeds and Glasgow back in the 90s, and recalls begging them not to sign with big record labels and go on TV all the time. 'But they told me they weren't changing their message, just taking it to a wider audience. It's possible to stay pretty true to your art,' says Sea.

Like Bitch, Sea isn't Daniela's true surname. She grew up in San Francisco and chose it partly because she feels close to the ocean. Her striking pale, bluey-green eyes have a touch of the maritime about them, but when I ask Bitch, who grew up in Pittsburgh and Detroit, to describe them, she grins affectionately at her shy lover and says: 'She's my Siberian husky'.

Bitch's relatives are originally from Wales and Ireland, and a lot of her family have always lived in Coventry. She and Daniela visit quite often to see the rellies, but find the area quite rough. Do they hold hands on the street there?

'Are you kidding? The jobs would murder us,' shrieks Bitch. 'And they think I'm some sort of fag,' chimes in Daniela.

Much safer in – of all places – New York City, they link arms affectionately and go on their creative way.

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