Stella & Mary McCARTNEY on their mother Linda

The fashion designer and the photographer remember a woman with unique style and incredible creative drive

Stella McCartney

I think about mum a lot now that I’m a mum too. I guess I feel her more around me. Like me, she was a mother of four – Heather (her daughter from her previous marriage), Mary, James and me – and I didn’t notice her ever saying: ‘I’ve got to manage this.’ It was all so effortless. She was incredibly easy and very real. So were her photographs. They were never staged.

With my kids, I’m always asking them to stand against a wall and look sweet. There was never any of that with mum. You didn’t even notice her taking pictures. She wouldn’t have said: ‘Stella and Mary, look at me!’ She would have just captured us, as she did in this photograph, which was taken in the Caribbean. That was how she worked. It was very much about capturing moments and her way of seeing things.

She was bought up in Scarsdale, New York. It was very Park Avenue and fabulous. I always used to joke that the American side of my family was the posh side and then there were the Scousers on the other side. But she, along with dad, was so against all of that privilege. We all went to comprehensive schools and grew up in a tiny two-bedroom house in the Sussex forest. It was very low-key. My mum would always say she’d be the happiest if we were all just in one room with a bit of food. It was very much about family and the little things in life.

Every summer, and for a few weeks in the school holidays, we’d head up to Scotland. My dad just happened to have a place there. It was a two-bedroom corrugated-iron farmhouse. We only had two rooms: four kids in one room, and mum and dad in the other.

We’d drive up for 13 hours in our rickety old Land Rover with the four dogs. We nicknamed our Land Rover ‘hell on wheels’. Mum and dad were sorted for space, cuddling in the front, listening to their eight-track cassettes. My siblings and I were all shoved in the back with the sheepdogs dribbling down our necks. It was a nightmare.

When we got there, I just remember playing outside all the time. I don’t remember toys. There was a loch we’d go swimming in, and the first one in was always the bravest because it was absolutely freezing – your heart would jump out of your throat. We were near the coast, too, so there were lots of beach moments.

April 2011 | HARPER'S BAZAAR | 61
It was very much just family. We never had house guests. The most sociable we ever got was when the blacksmith would come. We’d eat lots of family meals together around 10 at night, waiting for dad to come out of his tiny studio in one of the stables. We did a lot of bareback horse-riding. We had a horse called Jet and, like most Shetland ponies, he would buck us off at any second. Mary and I spent a lot of our time lying bareback on horses looking at the clouds. The fun was finding things in the clouds; ‘there’s a rabbit, there’s a dragon’.

As a fashion designer, I’ve found my mum’s photography really inspirational. I look at images of her quite a lot when I’m working. I try to capture her personality in my clothes. She would wear culottes to go horse-riding because she wanted to have a bit more femininity. I just think there is something so amazing about that and so beautiful: a woman who cuts her own hair – she was naturally blonde and had this mad hair; who wore no make-up and cowboy boots, a little Forties sweater and a pair of culottes while riding a stallion in Scotland. To me, that sums up everything I want to be.

Mary McCartney

In my late teens and early twenties (after years of being embarrassed by my mum and dad) I became quite interested in her background as a photographer. I began to understand who Jimi Hendrix, the Doors and Neil Young were – all figures she had photographed – and I spent a lot of time picking her brains. I remember she said she was very influenced, growing up in New York, by the photography collections at MoMA. And she loved rock ‘n’ roll music; she just loved the characters and, because she wanted to take pictures of them, it became her career.

She used to talk about leaving New York to go to college in Arizona. My mum’s mum died when she was 19, and my dad’s mum died when he was 14, so I think they had a real connection over that. I’ve always presumed that’s why she went to the other side of America – to get over it.

She loved the landscape there and the light, which is amazing. It was a great place for her to blossom as a photographer because desert light is a dream. That’s where she got the photography bug. A friend of hers was doing a short evening course and asked her to go along. She loved it straight away.

Later, she introduced Arizona to dad, and we used to go there often. It’s a whole other world; instead of trees, you have huge cacti – it’s like being in a Western. I remember on the first few visits getting freaked out by the scorpions.

I think she loved Scotland for similar reasons. She had space there. It was quiet and not too cluttered. Visually, she felt safe. That sense of freedom meant she could pick up her camera and spend an afternoon wandering around taking pictures. I think that comes across in her pictures. Also, the light was great there. I don’t remember Scotland ever being so sunny.

The photos taken in Scotland are nice because they are family oriented. We were her subjects as well as her family. They were about documenting what was happening, seeing something and snapping it at the time – that was one of her favourite things to do. She had a way of not making us self-conscious. She would wander into your room, take a picture, then wander back out and go see what someone else was doing and take a picture of them.

I remember she liked watching television with the sound down, which I used to find really annoying. She particularly loved cowboy films and watching the spotty Appaloosa horses the Indians were riding. She always loved horses but never had any. Dad was very proud that he was the one who got her a stallion. She loved it. She told me when she was younger she would give lessons at the local riding school and, in return, she was allowed to ride the horses.

I think her love of horses was similar to her love of photography. She was able to wander and observe and drift off. She would get up on a horse at any opportunity. Some of her pictures are actually taken on horseback. We’d go horse-riding together and she would bring the camera. There’s one shot of dad where you can see the horse’s ears and he’s riding in the foreground through the forest with a dapple of light coming through the trees, which is beautiful.

She certainly made taking pictures look easier than it was. Later, when I picked up a camera myself, I thought: ‘How did she focus, and get the light right and capture that image so quickly?’ But she wouldn’t really talk about it much. She just wanted the images to speak for themselves. There are certain pictures I take now that, looking through her archives, I think I could have been taken by her. As photographers, we are driven by a similar eye.

*“Mary McCartney: Life in Photographs” (Taschen) is published in late April.*