

ROCK CHIC

Carla Bruni

Former model-turned-musician Carla Bruni has garnered strong reactions as France's First Lady – some positive, some negative. **David Leser** looks beyond the headlines at the most powerful woman in France.

IT'S HARD TO KNOW where to start with the First Lady of France. With the full-length nude photograph of her published (and later auctioned for \$93,000) just prior to her dining on *noisette d'agneau* with the Queen of England? With her views on the rather quaint concept of monogamy? ("I'm monogamous from time to time, but I prefer polygamy and polyandry"). Or perhaps with her latest album, released last month, just prior to Bastille Day, where she sings huskily about Afghan heroin, Columbian cocaine and the 30 lovers she had before marrying the president of France? *I am a child despite my 40 years, despite my 30 lovers, a child.*

Okay, why beat around the bush? Let's start with the lovers. It's not often (actually make that *never* in history) that you'd find the former bedmate of rock stars (Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton to name but two), as well as lawyers, actors, philosophers, businessmen (well, alright, she denies Donald Trump) and former prime ministers, enthroned, as it were, in the Élysée Palace.

Never mind her label as the "new Diana" or the 21st century Jackie Kennedy, Carla Bruni, the Italian-born heiress-turned-supermodel-turned-pop singer-turned First Lady of France, is like something straight out of the pages of an 18th century courtesan's tale – beautiful, highly intelligent – she used to hide her Dostoyevsky novels under her *Elle* and *Vogue* magazines in between fashion shoots – fluent in three languages and, yes, equally assured in the art of love.

"Love lasts a long time, but burning desire – two to three weeks," she has said. When she was a 21-year-old supermodel sharing the catwalk with Naomi Campbell and Claudia Schiffer, Carla met the legendary guitarist, Eric Clapton, who believed he'd just found the love of his life ... until he made the dreadful mistake of taking her to a Rolling Stones concert. "Please, Mick, not this one," he begged his friend after introducing them. "I think I'm in love."

Days later, Mick Jagger and Carla

started their affair, one which was to ultimately help steer Mick's relationship with Texan supermodel Jerry Hall onto the rocks. Carla stayed with Mick long enough to tour with the Rolling Stones, but other "burning desires" eventually took over, including ones for American actor Kevin Costner, French actor Vincent Perez, former French Prime Minister Laurent Fabius (now considered a practice run for the presidency), and former French Education Minister Luc Ferry, who was to say famously, "I was between Laurent Fabius and Mick Jagger".

Perhaps the relationship which was to cause the greatest collective raised eyebrow was in 2000, when she began living with the French publisher, Jean-Paul Enthoven, only to fall in love with Jean-Paul's married philosopher son, Raphael, 10 years her junior. The couple went on to have a son, Aurélien, who is now seven years old.

Raphael's infuriated wife, Justine Levy, the daughter of French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy, responded by >>>

CLAUDE GASSIAN/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES

Supermodel, rock singer and now France's controversial First Lady Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, 40.



**“SO WHAT IF SHE HAD A LOT OF LOVERS?
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IF SHE WAS A MAN, THERE WOULD BE NO PROBLEM.”**



Above: Carla on the catwalk in 1994. Top, left: Carla and her husband Nicolas Sarkozy. Right: The First Lady greeting the Qatar emir’s wife on Bastille Day.

writing a best-selling novel – *Rien de grave* (*Nothing Serious*) – in which she described a woman remarkably similar to Carla as a “praying mantis” with a “Terminator smile”.

Carla remained unfazed. “Everyone knows husbands are rarely stolen,” she retorted. “You either know how to keep them, or you don’t.” And just for good measure, she recorded a song which talked about how madly in love she was and how the sex just sizzled. The song was called *Raphael*.

“That’s the thing about Carla Bruni,” one French businesswoman told *The Weekly*. “She’s slept with half the planet, but doesn’t give a shit about it. It’s nice for a change – that a woman can be like that.”

Needless to say, if an American, British or Australian First – or would-be First – Lady boasted this kind of sexual history, her husband’s career would almost certainly be finished.

Yet this is *La France*, more particularly Paris, a city charged with sensuality, horrified by prudery and seemingly unshockable in the ways of love. “So what if she had a lot of lovers?” an Italian-born French fashion designer told *The Weekly*. “We don’t care about her private life. If she was a man, there would be no problem.”

Too true, except many people here, including the president’s traditional

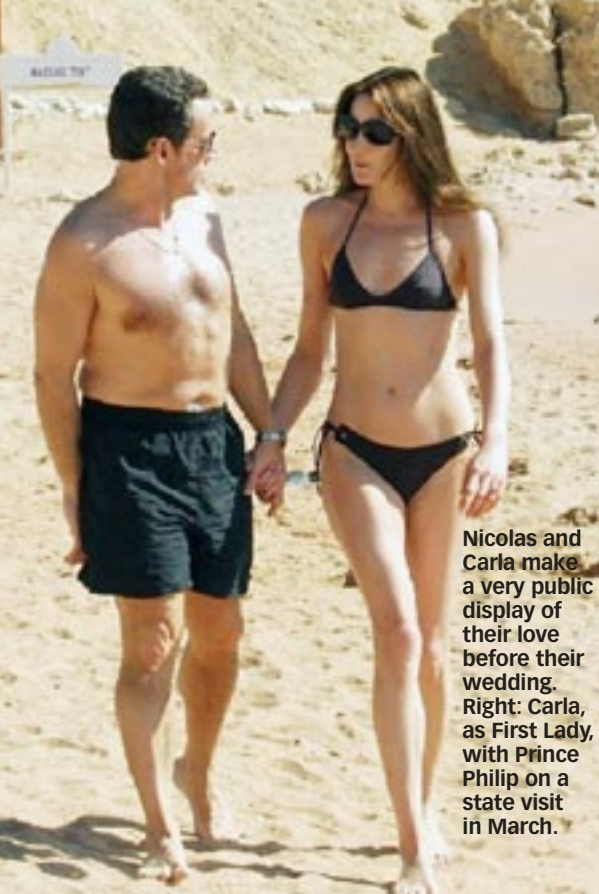
supporters on the Right, have been more than a little taken aback by the speed with which the Carla-Nicolas romance blossomed and the manner in which the president has flaunted his private life in public. (They compare it to the rather gallant days of old, when former Socialist President François Mitterand lived a double life for 20 years, keeping a second family and siring an illegitimate daughter.)

Elected to the presidency in May 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy, child of a Hungarian immigrant father and a mother of Jewish descent, was soon on the lookout for a new partner, having obtained a divorce from his second wife, Cecilia Ciganer-Albeniz, in October of that year.

CECILIA AND NICOLAS had married in 1996, after it was discovered by the first Mrs Sarkozy, Marie Dominique Culioli, that her husband, then the mayor of the Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, had been conducting an eight-year affair with Cecilia, who, at the time, was Marie Dominique’s best friend. (Nicolas had actually fallen in love with the heavily pregnant Cecilia while performing her marriage ceremony as mayor.)

Cecilia, a former model herself, was never cut out to be the First Lady of France and, in 2005, while Nicolas was making his pitch for the presidency, escaped to >>>

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Nicolas and Carla make a very public display of their love before their wedding. Right: Carla, as First Lady, with Prince Philip on a state visit in March.



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New York with her lover, the international communications consultant, Richard Attias. (She is now married to him.) A few months later, she was back by her husband’s side and, for a while, the rapprochement appeared permanent.

Writing in his autobiography, *Testimony*, last year, Nicolas said, “C is Cecilia. Cecilia is my wife. She is part of me ... We were made for each other [and] today Cecilia and I have gotten back together for real, and surely forever.”

A few months after those words were penned, the couple was obtaining a hurried divorce and the president of France was sending feelers out for a new partner. “Do you know a good girl for me?” he reportedly asked Jacques Séguéla, the famous French public relations spin doctor.

Jacques did. Carla Bruni. She happened to live in his old house, a two-storey retreat nestled behind olive and palm trees in the 16th arrondissement, and yes, of course, it would be possible to arrange a discreet evening.

Was this what Carla had been seeking? Had she really confided to a friend not long before meeting Nicolas, “I want a man with nuclear power?” (France has 350 nuclear warheads in its stockpile). No, Carla replies today. “I never said that. I didn’t even know he had nuclear power, *pooverino* [poor man]. I found out afterwards. How sad to have nuclear power; it means you might use it.”

The dinner was a roaring success – seven of them in a house outside Paris, with Carla sitting on the president’s right. “My first impression of Nicolas,” she said, “and I still have that impression, was of a very magnetic man, with very rare intelligence and energy. I’m pretty bewitched by him, plus I’ve always liked to talk with my friends or the few men I’ve loved and, with him, it’s a conversation without end. It was pretty much love at first sight.”

SO MUCH SO THAT, according to one reliable source, the couple went home in the presidential car to Carla’s house at about 1am. Nothing happened. “Carla called Séguéla,” the source said, “to complain that the president had not tried to make love to her. ‘Calm down, calm down,’ Séguéla told Carla. ‘Maybe tomorrow.’”

He was right. In the days that followed, the French president would woo Carla with text messages, flowers and gifts. Within two weeks, they were being photographed at Disneyland, before spending the night at a nearby hotel.

By Christmas they were on holiday in Egypt and Jordan, and then, on February 2, in a private ceremony at the Élysée Palace, Carla Bruni was saying *oui* to becoming the third Mrs Sarkozy, in many people’s eyes the most powerful woman in France.

Carla Bruni is no stranger to high culture, wealth and power. Born in Turin, Italy, on

December 23, 1967, she is the daughter of Italian concert pianist, Marysa Borini, and step-daughter of Alberto Bruni Tedeschi, the rich Turinese tyre maker, art collector and classical composer.

Among the guests they would often welcome to their castle in the Po Valley were singer Maria Callas, pianist Arthur Rubinstein and conductor Herbert von Karajan.

They lived in Versailles-like splendour, but at the age of seven, Carla was forced to move with her family to France in order to escape the wave of kidnapping and assassination attempts being orchestrated by the terrorist group, the Red Brigades.

Carla went to boarding school in Switzerland, returned to Paris to study art and architecture, then decided on a modelling career at the age of 19.

By the mid-1990s, she was among the highest paid supermodels in the world, working for fashion houses and designers such as Dior, Christian Lacroix, Karl Lagerfeld, Chanel, Versace and Yves Saint Laurent.

She was beautiful, in a cool, sculptured way, and supremely confident – at least on the surface. At a deeper level, she showed signs of being troubled. “She has always been very, very neurotic about men,” says a fellow Paris-based Italian, who has known Carla since her modelling days and followed her career keenly. “I think that’s because she has a big >>>

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problem with fathers, with men, because it has been a big disaster for her, always changing men.”

Last year, Carla admitted she had discovered her biological father was not Alberto Bruni Tedeschi, the man she had grown up with, but rather an Italian businessman, Maurizio Remmert, with whom her mother had had a six-year affair. Carla discovered the truth of her origins in 1996, but insisted it was not a traumatic revelation.

“For me it was a relief, a gift,” she said. “I felt relieved, the way you feel when someone explains something to you. In any case, the man who brought me up is still very present in my life. What did trouble me was that it all came out when I got married and when it’s written up by other people, it’s always a bit ugly. But this is a beautiful story.”

In 1997, the year after she discovered the truth of her origins, Carla turned her

honour of her half-brother, Virginio, who died of cancer in 2006. (The title is also a commentary on the way Carla has attempted to continue her musical career despite becoming First Lady of France.)

Stage-managed by Pierre Charon, a special envoy to the president, the album – the proceeds of which will go to a French charity – has been getting the kind of media attention normally reserved for European summits and not necessarily all favourable.

“Quite possibly the best album ever made by the wife of a head of state,” remarked the London *Times* sarcastically.

The song *Tu es ma came* (*You are my dope*), where she compares obsessional love (presumably with the president) to addiction “*more lethal than Columbian white*”, drew an official complaint from the Columbian foreign minister.

In another song, the flute-filled *Ta Tienne* (*Yours*) Madame Bruni-Sarkozy sings (again presumably about the president),

we use to cover up unpleasant smells in public places.”

It is true that Carla Bruni is everywhere – at Windsor Castle in her Dior outfit buttering up the queen and Duke of Edinburgh; in Tel Aviv in her Prada dress and gladiator sandals, causing the Israeli president to blush and the Middle East peace process to temporarily stall; at the Élysée Palace in a glittering black cocktail dress to welcome George W. Bush and his wife, Laura, on their last official visit to Paris (“She’s a really smart, capable woman,” said the American president, “and I can see why you married her.”); at the funeral of her old friend Yves Saint Laurent; at the side of French-Columbian hostage Ingrid Betancourt as she returned to a rapturous nation after more than six years in captivity; at the Bastille Day celebrations with more than 40 world leaders.

And why not? Given her husband’s historically low ratings in the polls – some

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back on modelling to take up a career in music. She’d been playing the guitar from the age of eight and, as she got older, increasingly turning her preoccupations with love and intimacy into song – breathy ballads influenced by the likes of The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and Billie Holiday.

In 2002, she released her debut album, *Quelqu’un m’a dit* (*Someone Told Me*), produced by ex-lover French guitarist Louis Bertignac. Despite snickering from the local press, the album became a cult hit throughout Europe, selling two million copies. One British critic described it as “deliciously languorous”.

Awarded the equivalent of the French Grammy two years later for best female artist, Carla then released a second album last year called *No Promises* in which she set the poems of Yeats, Auden and Emily Dickinson to music. She attributed her love of English poetry to the instructions she took from her friend, the English singer Marianne Faithfull, also a former lover of Mick Jagger’s.

Now, barely five months after becoming the third Mrs Sarkozy, having turned an Élysée Palace salon into a music room, the Italian-born chanteuse has released her third album, *Comme si de rien n’était* (*As If Nothing Had Happened*) named in

“*You are my Lord, you’re my darling, you’re my orgy ... my charming Prince, I am yours ... I who always sought fire, am burning for you like a pagan woman.*”

It was enough to cause one commentator near apoplexy. “I would prefer that someone pour molten steel in my ears than have to listen to this modern-day Marie Antoinette,” he remarked, echoing recent unfavourable comparisons to the wife of King Louis XVI beheaded during the French Revolution.

Under the headline “Enough is enough”, the weekly political journal *Marianne* declared the country was getting sick and tired of the 40-year-old First Lady’s “continual preening and showing off for the world’s media”.

“The president himself seems to be saying at every opportunity, ‘Isn’t she beautiful, isn’t she clever, doesn’t she sing well?’ And the public are getting tired of it. They are always pawing each other in public, which might be normal for newlyweds, but he is the president and she is the First Lady, and they are not exactly young. The endless photos of Carla cosying up to [the 53-year-old] Nicolas have become nothing more than a vulgar charade. She is not so much perfume, but a very strong freshener that

put his popularity at around 30 per cent – Carla has become his single greatest asset (they call it the “Carla Effect”), putting an end, mercifully, to the flashy “President Bling Bling” image and his propensity for Ray-Ban sunglasses and Rolex watches.

“Carla has brought the president grace, elegance, international culture; she makes his trips more presidential,” says Jacques Séguéla, the man who brought them together.

The question, of course, is: will it last? Many people have their doubts, including one international publishing executive, who told *The Weekly*, “She will stay with him while he is president and then it’s hard to imagine it continuing. I don’t think anyone really thinks they’ll grow old together.”

In the days following her new album’s release, Madame Bruni-Sarkozy was doing everything to persuade the French public otherwise. In various interviews, she praised the president for his paternal, feminine side, extolled the virtues of family life and talked about how she wanted to have a child with her husband (he has three sons from his two previous marriages).

“I needed to live 40 years,” she said, “and to find the right person, before maturity gave me access to a kind of love that I would say is more complete. That’s why I got married.” ■