

WINE WOMEN & SONG

Fatherhood — and running a winery — have tamed hell-raiser Mick Hucknall, who shortly will head our way to croon the swansong for Simply Red, writes Sally Browne



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THE image of him as a playboy in the 1990s was "very fair", says Mr Simply Red, Mick Hucknall.

But the pop superstar who has sold more than 50 million records, racked up 20-plus chart hits and had more than a few dates with stars including Catherine Zeta Jones and Helena Christensen, now says times have changed.

"I was having a great time," he admits of his heavy drinking and philandering phase. "But you can't do that forever. You get bored. I was getting fried doing it. I started to get more out of getting drunk than getting laid and you just can't live like that forever. You either destroy yourself or you pull back and go, 'Wait a second, take stock and see what you're doing with your life'."

"That's kind of what I was doing between '96 and 2000. (I) was trying to sort myself out really. So I've taken a different turn now and just gone on to a different part of my life. It's different, but it's equally wonderful."

These days it's looking after his salmon river in rural Ireland, producing wine on the island of Sicily and taking care of his baby daughter Romy True that keep him busy and fulfilled.

"You can probably hear a crying baby in the background," he says down the line from his home in Britain.

Romy, whose hair, like her father's, is simply red, was born in June last year. Her mum is

Gabriella Wesberry, who manages his wine business and is an old flame with whom he rekindled a relationship in 2003. Their ginger-haired daughter has changed her dad's life.

"It makes it easier for me to get up at seven o'clock in the morning to do interviews for Australia," he says jovially. "I'd no idea what I was letting myself in for. It's really quite an experience seeing her grow and change. I was lucky to be at the stage in my career where I'm able to spend time at home. My manager was saying, 'Yeah, give it a few months and you'll be ready to get out on the road again', but it's not true actually. I've really been enjoying it."

Hucknall, 47, is in a good mood. After taking time out to look after Romy, for whom the pair refuse to hire a nanny, and releasing a tribute album to old blues hero Bobby Bland under the name Mick

Hucknall, he is gearing up to go on tour with Simply Red for the last time.

The colossal tour is timed with the release of a 25th anniversary greatest hits CD, after which he'll be hanging up his Simply Red hat for good.

"The Simply Red sound is mainly influenced by music of the '70s and the '80s and I think I'd explored it," he explains.

"When you go out to perform a show with the name of Simply Red, they want to hear the hits. It makes it very difficult to bring in new material or try something new."

This time round fans will get the hits, including songs *Holding Back the Years* (a song he wrote at the ripe old age of 17), *If You Don't Know Me By Now* (which has become truer than ever) and *Stars*.

The Australian leg includes a run of shows in wineries which Hucknall, a keen vintner, is excited about.

Hucknall got into wine seriously about 10 years ago. "I kind of got a little bit fat doing it because I didn't spit it out. But I thought it was important for me to get a knowledge of the different grape varieties."

He owns an 18th-century estate on the slopes of Mt Etna run by wine specialist Salvatore Foti, and produces the small label Il Cantante (The Singer).

Recently, Foti was named wine-maker of the year by Slow Food Italy and Hucknall visited to cel-

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