

Vanessa Paradis' passion is making music but the French star is still making an impact on the big screen. By **Matt Mueller**

Happy days in ooh-la-la land

It seems peculiar to find Vanessa Paradis in LA. She's so quintessentially French in appearance and mannerisms, it would be far more appropriate if we were downing espressos under a Gauloise haze in Paris's Café de Flore, the 6th arrondissement coffee house once frequented by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Even more so because the *Café de Flore* happens to be the name of her new French-language film. But LA's where it's been at for Paradis thus far in 2012. She and Johnny Depp have decamped to one of the couple's many homes (they also have residences in France, New York and the Bahamas) with their children, 12-year-old Lily-Rose and 10-year-old Jack, while he shoots his role as Native American scout Tonto in Disney's \$215m tentpole, *The Lone Ranger*. While he's on location in New Mexico, she's spending her days writing songs for her new album, which she plans to record in the autumn, release in early 2013 and support with a tour. "It's my favourite thing, touring," she says in a surprisingly husky voice. "I love it so much."

Paradis' passion has always been music before acting, which she has only done sporadically and possibly half-heartedly at times. She's made several albums in a music career that began before she'd broached adolescence, even if for a vast majority outside France it still begins and ends with her 1987 helium-toned single, "Joe Le Taxi". And she'd love nothing more than to discuss music now (she's currently beguiled by a pair of Canadian artists, singer-songwriter Feist and the folk collective Timber Timbre), even though our reason for meeting is director Jean-Marc Vallée's *Café de Flore*. It was Vallée who brought Timber Timbre to her attention, and his own musical fervour made him Paradis' ideal collaborator. The French-Canadian film-maker fought to score his previous film, *The Young Victoria*, entirely to the music of Sigur Rós. The producers wouldn't

allow it, but he gets to indulge his whims in *Café de Flore*, in which the Icelandic group's ethereal sounds play a haunting role. "He is so much about music, playing music on the set, writing the script around certain songs, editing the film to a musical rhythm," buzzes Paradis. "He somehow is a musician and that was a big, big plus for me."

Initially, Vallée didn't want Paradis for Jacqueline. He was considering several other French actresses, but her impassioned



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plea was enough to sway him. *Café de Flore* tells two intertwined stories: the first, set in present-day Montreal, shows the devastating emotional turmoil when a music producer (Kevin Parent) leaves his wife (Hélène Florent) for another woman, despite the wife's belief that their union was carved in destiny; the other is set in 1969 Paris, where self-sufficient single mother Jacqueline (Paradis) is raising a young son with Down's syndrome but feels their inseparable bond coming under threat when he develops a close attachment to another child with Down's.

Paradis was thrilled Vallée offered her Jacqueline because she's unlike anyone she'd played before, and so unlike herself: unglamorous, self-sacrificing, with hard edges and one ferocious goal in life: to devote her being to

ensuring her vulnerable son grow up strong and elongates his limited life expectancy. "Because she's so different from me, I had to erase a bunch of things," says the actress. "I had to act without using any femininity, seduction, fragility, sensitivity – there was none of that. I had to brush it off completely."

Paradis ends up being heart-breaking in the role and was duly rewarded with the Best Actress award at the 2012 Genies, Canada's equivalent to the Oscars. She couldn't be there to accept in person but gave a note to Vallée to read out just in case, in which she heaped praise on "my amazing partner in the film" – the Down's syndrome child, Marin Gerrier, who plays her son and who Paradis admits she was terrified of frightening on set during *Café de Flore*'s tougher moments. "I was so afraid that he would believe that I am this monster in real life," she says, unleashing a throat-rattling smoker's cough. "I just made sure each time that I had to be rough

with him that as soon as they say, 'Cut', we would hug each other or say something stupid and have a big laugh. He always knew that when it was done, I was just Vanessa." Paradis also fostered a happy atmosphere on set, organising parties for Gerrier and her own offspring. "We played music and danced and ate fries and drank Coca-Cola. It was great," she says.

Vallée shot in Montreal first before journeying to Paris to work with Paradis. When he arrived, he'd already cut together the present-day storyline, leading to long discourses about his film's notion of soulmates (which relates to her strand in ways we can't reveal). So is Paradis a believer herself? "Oof, that's a big debate," she says, letting out a deep sigh. "I don't like things set in stone. I believe in love, obviously, but calling somebody a soulmate is like the end of your story already. I want to believe that it lasts forever but to say, 'This is it'... You know this is it for the moment but there's something disturbing to me to talk about it with such finality. What I like the best is the present



Full of beans: Vanessa Paradis (above), the award-winning star of 'Café de Flore', which is released next month; with her husband, Johnny Depp (left) SIPA PRESS/REX FEATURES, KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES

moment and no definite answers. I don't believe forever exists."

That might be more grist to the mill for rumour-mongers who recently claimed Depp and Paradis, together since the late 1990s, have been leading separate lives. Paradis, who otherwise subscribes fiercely to the French code of privacy, felt compelled to deny it in January on the French talk show *Le Grand Journal*. "It's false," she told host Michel Denizot. "People say we have 52 houses in France and that is along with saying we split up every winter... and that I'm on my 12th pregnancy. All that is not too serious but this latest one is a rumour which could cause a lot of harm to my family and my children."

Take comfort then, all is well in the Depp-Paradis universe. As for *Café de Flore*, it could be a sign that Paradis is entering a new, more intriguing phase in her acting career. Despite winning a French

César for her 1989 debut, *Noce Blanche*, she's turned down major film offers over the years from the likes of Pedro Almodóvar and John Boorman while taking prolonged sabbaticals from the profession.

With her starring roles in *Heartbreaker* and *Café de Flore*, it seems she's picking up the pace again. "The movies and the parts I'm being offered are becoming better and better," she insists, defying the widely accepted notion that getting older is perilous for beautiful actresses. "Well, I don't think I'm that old yet," counters Paradis.

Paradis has two more movies in the can: *Cornouailles*, a small-scale drama set on the Brittany coast ("I don't know if it will come out in England") and *Je Me Suis Fait Tout Petit*. "I think it's what you call

a dramatic comedy," she laughs. "It's as charming as it gets, the story of a man and a little boy. It was only a 10-day job but I get to play somebody that's full of fun inside and that makes you feel lighter."

She still holds out hope, too, for the eventual fruition of a long-mooted project in which she would star as aforementioned *Café de Flore* patron Simone de Beauvoir while Depp would play her lover, American author Nelson Algren. The script is loosely adapted from the Gallic writer-philosopher's own autobiographical work, *The Mandarins*, which went into great detail about the couple's sexual relationship. "It's an amazing subject, a beautiful script and we both want to do it," she says. "But we've got to find the time, that's the thing. We both have so much plans now..."

'Café de Flore' is released on 11 May