

FEATURES



The Beautiful, The Damned, and The Gospel According to PAULEY PERRETTE

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Most college students pick a major, graduate, and enter the workplace based on their course of study. Most aspiring actors work in restaurants or bars while waiting for their big break. Pauley Perrette, in her usual fashion, played it out rather unconventionally, by inadvertently merging the two clichés and ending up co-starring with Mark Harmon on the long-running CBS police procedural drama, “NCIS,” otherwise known as one of the most watched television shows in the world.

Born in New Orleans, the young Ms. Perrette grew up all over the American South, moving frequently from “Georgia to Alabama to Tennessee to North and South Carolina.” Somewhere along this nomadic path, a fascination with crime developed, leading her to attend Valdosta State University in Georgia where she studied psychology, sociology, and criminal science. Upon graduation, she moved to New York City to complete a master’s program in criminal and forensic science. And then life took a sharp and surreal turn. Needing to fund her education, Perrette took a bartending gig where a co-worker, impressed by her quirky sexiness, punky look, and “white Mohawk,” thought that she

could get acting work and suggested she meet with a director he knew. Perrette took a meeting with the director and has not stopped working in the entertainment industry since — moving from music videos and commercials to steady work in film (*Almost Famous* in 2000, *The Ring* in 2002) and television (“The Drew Carey Show,” “24,” “CSI,” “JAG”). Then in 2003, Perrette landed the role of eccentric/gothic forensic scientist, Abby Sciuto, on “NCIS” and began riding a seven-year (and counting!) wave of Hollywood success, ironically playing a fictional character who works in Perrette’s real-life field of study. Most people would call this a strange and wild coincidence, but Perrette feels that it all makes perfect sense. She seems to immediately understand things that others eventually figure out.

Aside from sharing an obsessive fascination with criminal science, several tattoos, and a propensity toward talking really fast, Pauleyn Perrette and Abby Sciuto are not all that alike. Whereas Abby is “very focused and streamlined,” being around Perrette is like being caught in a friendly machine-gun spray of rapid-fire intelligence, passion, spirituality, positive and tireless energy, confidence, compassion, humor, and faith. Everything hits you at once. Her mind works at a blinding speed, and her words can barely keep up with her rush of thoughts. She creates as she observes and observes as she creates. You would think this hyperkinetic mental state would be exhausting, but it only seems to further energize her, enabling her to juggle being a writer, poet, musician, boxer, photographer, producer, and hardcore civil and animal rights activist (she actively campaigns for LGBT rights and supports a dog-rescue organization) — all while keeping the busy schedule of a working actor on a hit series.

Venice caught up with the husky-voiced Renaissance woman during a break between set ups at a Silver Lake photography studio. She stepped outside wearing a hot-pink bathrobe “from Target,” brown knee-high rain boots, a limegreen bikini bottom and a white tank top — a random concoction of bits from the day’s photo-session wardrobe. She thinks her outfit is funny because it reminds her of “the way little kids put together crazy outfits that don’t match or make any sense.” And she is right. It is funny.

Venice: You grew up in many different states and places. Why did you move around so much and where do you consider yourself to be from?

Pauley Perrette:

My dad worked for the phone company, so we relocated all the time. My sister and I used to joke about him possibly being a fugitive. We didn’t really think that he was, but it was more fun than saying he worked for the phone company. Most of my family is from Alabama, so I consider that my home base. My dad still lives there, in the middle of the woods.

Did you ever have any desire to become an actor?

No. I never even thought about it or had any desire to act. I was studying sociology, psychology, criminal science, and forensics. I wanted to be an FBI agent or a cop, but I was never brave enough to be a cop.

So why did you even bother to try acting?

Money. I was a broke student and I needed to pay for school. I started booking commercials, music videos, and short films, and I’ve been working ever since, though I still think about going back and finishing my master’s.

Even now that you are on one of the most popular shows on TV?

Yes. I think about it all the time.

Do you have any formal training as an actor? Have you ever had acting lessons?

No. I don’t really know what people learn in acting school.

So what process or methodology do you use to make your character authentic and your performance believable?

I have been studying human behavior as a science for years. By being a student of social sciences, like psychology and sociology, I have the best acting training ever. I tell actors all the time to get out of class and go to a bar. Watch people.

What do you like about acting?

Being an actor is like being on an insane drug. You lose yourself in it and you cease to exist as yourself. That’s what drugs do to people. When you are acting, you cease to exist. It’s a really incredible feeling. A healthy drug.

Who inspires and influences you?

Eleanor Roosevelt, Emily Dickinson, Amelia Earhart, Martin Luther King, Jr — everything about Martin Luther King, Jr. And Frank Serpico. Not the movie, *Serpico*; the real Frank Serpico.

Let’s talk about Abby Sciuto, your character on “NCIS.” After seven seasons, what keeps you interested in playing her?

First of all, I love Abby. You have to either love or hate a character to consider them real, and I love Abby! And I am also a really big fan of the show. I love it and I am very grateful for having all of the amazing people I get to work with in my life. Not too long ago I had a hypnotherapy session and the therapist told me to close my eyes and “go to a safe place.” And I went to work! That’s my safe place.

How much of yourself do you draw upon to play Abby? I would imagine that your education in criminal science helps you to play the role.

It definitely helps with the big words in the script, but I've actually learned so much from being on the show. And with me being such a big science junkie, it's almost like doing the show is a way of completing my master's degree. *[laughs]* Nobody is as smart as Abby, so I learn a lot from her. Abby's physicality is actually based completely on my dog, Cece *[pronounced "C.C."]* She's a brain-damaged Chihuahua mix that I rescued. And I really have based a lot of Abby on her. The way she can read people's emotions, like Abby can. Abby's gothic ponytails are Cece's ears. Abby's gait is the way Cece walks and the way Abby cocks her head is the same way that Cece does. The only difference is that Cece is mean and Abby's not.

You are also a writer, a poet, a photographer, and a musician. What medium of artistic expression do you find most satisfying?

It's hard to say. I don't think an artistic outlet is really something you choose. It's something that is laid upon you. All art comes from a higher power. In a way, it's a curse, but it's a beautiful curse. I often will wake up with a complete song or a poem completely written from beginning to end in my head and then I will rush to a pen or pencil to write it down on a napkin, a table, an arm, whatever I can find! *[laughs]* The creative process is my favorite thing. I love to write and to record music. Performing live is a different story. Writing and recording are like cooking. Listening is like eating. Performing live is like puking on people. Performing is just not necessary to me. And I have terrible stage fright.

What do you think you would do if you couldn't be an artist?

You can be an artist no matter what you do, if you are an artist. You can work in the post office and be an artist.

How would you be a creative artist if you had to work all week long in the post office?

I'd be writing songs and poems down on all the envelopes. Writing all over people's mail.

"NCIS" is one of the most successful shows going right now and Abby is a very well liked character. What is your relationship with fame?

Fame is a problem. Fame is a monster that I am very uncomfortable with. Because Abby is so loved all over the world, people have extremely high expectations of me, and I don't want to let anyone down. But I also don't like not being able to just be flawed, ridiculous, and annoying, which is what I really am. *[laughs]* I never tried to become famous. I just started booking jobs and it never stopped. I'm not the celebrity type. I am more like Charles Bukowski. I just want to stay home and drink and write by myself. And then there's the whole curse of having people with nothing better to do than plant false information about you on the Internet. And, since the laws have not yet caught up with the speed of the Internet, there is nothing that you can do about it. In a way, famous people become victims. It just so happens that the consequences of being good at what you do involve fame and suicide.

What do you do to relax? What calms you?

I am obsessive about finding time to be alone. I like to light candles, listen to music, sit, and write.

What would you bring with you on a vacation?

Myself. *[laughs]* My animals. Candles. Music.

What would you like to do on your vacation?

Nothing. I would just do nothing.

Has anyone ever told you that you talk too fast?

Only the people who listen too slow. *[laughs]* ▼

"NCIS" airs Tuesdays at 8PM on CBS.