

Inside Playboy Mansion with Hugh Hefner

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I FIRST laid eyes on Hugh Hefner when the Playboy magnate sauntered into his wooden-walled living room and started chatting to about 20 journalists from around the world.

This was not any living room. It was one of the 30 rooms comprising the most decadent Gothic-inspired house in Los Angeles – the Playboy Mansion.

There was a big open fireplace to one side, a pipe organ in the corner behind louvred doors, two Chesterfields, a much-loved and fading tiger-print lounge near the window and a wooden coffee table engraved with images of semi-naked women.

The glass-panelled French windows overlooked an expansive backyard where flamingos and peacocks shared the dappled sunlight.

Heavy, tan velvet curtains draped windows and the ceiling was detailed with elaborate frescos. If only the walls could have talked.

It was into this room that Hefner walked. Mr Playboy was wearing his trademark black silk pyjamas and scarlet smoking jacket.

He started talking about, well, I do not remember what he talked about. I was so transfixed by the ageing porn king I forgot to turn on my recording device.

I remembered I was sitting on one of his Chesterfields in the line of work about 30 seconds later. Then I remembered to close my mouth and breathe.

"I'm getting away with murder here and I know it," Hefner said. "I'm living out a lot of people's fantasies. Young girls hanging out together – it has almost a Wizard of Oz quality about it."

"Hef", as he likes to be called, will be 82 in April.

At times he looked every bit his age. His hands shook slightly, his voice sometimes wavered, his hearing often failed him.

And yet he was arm-in-arm with not one busty blonde, but three. All smiled with pride at the sight of him. At one point, he had seven girlfriends sharing his mansion. Age had caught up with him it seemed.

Hef and his live-in girlfriends, Holly Madison, 28, Bridget Marquardt, 33, and Kendra Wilkinson, 22, parade their unusual lifestyle in the hit reality television series *Girls of the Playboy Mansion*, in its fourth season on Foxtel's E! Channel. Earlier seasons received free-to-air billing on Channel 9. The series is one of the highest in the US and has developed a cult following in Australia.

Hefner says the reality is different from the fantasy.

"First and foremost, they are a lot different than one would imagine three girls living with an old guy would be," he said.

"They're not blonde bimbos, they are very special ladies.

"Despite the variety in their personalities, they share common qualities of sincerity and honesty. They're all fun to be with and they all help to keep me feeling young."

As in the animal kingdom, the girlfriends maintain decorum in the mansion through a pecking order. Holly is Queen of the Blondes.

Legend has it Holly – who worked at Hooters before moving in with Hef and who is the main girlfriend on the show – is also the dominant female behind closed bedroom doors. She is reputedly in the room with Hef when he is with other women.

Hefner has said his relationship with her is real and that it will probably last the rest of his life.

However, while Holly is rumoured to be keen for a marriage proposal, it seems Hef is not keen to pop the question.

"I haven't been very lucky with marriages," he said. "I tried it twice and devoted myself to it.

"But when I came out of my second marriage, I discovered the whole world was waiting for me to come out and play.

"When I was growing up, the idolised girls in the movies were the Jean Harlows, the Betty Grables. I came out of my marriage a little broken and bruised. Was seven blonde girlfriends an over-compensation? I do believe so."

Holly said their love was more than skin deep.

"We have a lot of common interests," she said. "He has a great sense of humour and is a lot of fun.

"He's always up to trying new things and even if he's not, we can drag him into it."

Hef's other girlfriends are equally gushing.

"He's a kid at heart," Bridget said. "He loves to play games – dessert first – that kind of thing. But he's still a gentleman, opening doors, being very respectful and he loves to create amazing experiences."

Tomboy Kendra (who was recovering from her second breast enhancement) agreed.

"Guys these days are sick," she said. "I wish guys would look up to Hef. He respects females. He loves women. I wish guys really looked up

to him and followed in his footsteps instead of thinking of him as a pimp."

Kendra moved in with Hefner four years ago – when, at 18, she was not old enough to legally drink in the US. Her family was supportive.

"Kendra's mother says if she was younger, she'd be over here in a second," Hefner said.

"The alternatives are not what they were in the old-fashioned days. The alternatives often are to have their daughters out there in an uncertain world with young guys, getting into trouble – drugs and other – and I think the parents, if they had any reservations initially, all those reservations have disappeared because they found out there's security here.

"As unique as the relationship may be, it is a safe and happy one."

The girls agree.

"This is a very unusual and unique situation and I don't think it can really be duplicated," Bridget said. "Nobody else would have this situation going on.

"We are three normal girls with loving families who have their heads on straight, who do not do drugs and who go out and do good for the world," Kendra said.

"We pose naked – yeah – but that's it. We're good people. We're normal people. I think parents allow their kids to look up to us because of that."

But Hefner is not perfect. The girlfriends dished some dirt on his annoying habits.

"He cries a lot," Bridget said. "He cries when he wants to get his way. And at the moment he's domino-addicted."

Despite the fame that had come with the show, Holly did not see herself as an example.

"I don't think about myself as a role model for younger people, unless it's about something like following your dreams, work ethic and things like that," she said.

What advice did Hefner have for men looking to replicate his lifestyle and get away with having three girlfriends whose combined ages equalled his own?

"You have to pick your parents well," said the man whose mother lived to be 101.

"Good DNA helps a great deal. I think the other issue that is important is mental attitude. If you are healthy physically, then age really has a lot to do with attitude.

"I have always been a happy fellow, but of course I have a lot of reason to be happy."

Hef said much of this attitude has been spurred by the fact that he saw his life as a movie.

"The major influence in my life – other than family, I was raised in a typical, mid-Western Methodist home in Chicago, was born in 1926 and grew up in the Depression – was the movies.

"I escaped into the dreams and fantasies you can live out in your own mind in that darkened theatre and I think I started doing that at an early age related to my own life."

When talking about how men should best treat women, Hefner sounded more like a Romance King than a Porn King.

"Keep it real," he said. "Forget about the lines. Forget about the bulls**t.

"Let a woman know who you are and be sincere. Be honest. Be straight. It's always worked for me."

I will not forget the short time I spent wandering around the reality of Hef and his harem.

It is a reality that, despite the flamingos, hot tubs, celebrity-only parties and fast cars, I am glad will never be mine.