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KELLY ROWLAND
“I had to learn my strength”
After releasing her most soul-baring album to date and snagging a judge’s chair on the American version of the reality competition show The X Factor, Kelly Rowland is triumphantly at the top of her game.

BY KAREN GOOD MARABLE
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You’d never know it was a sunny afternoon inside Long Island’s Nassau Coliseum, flashing neon lights and the sonic screams of teenagers curse the dark. It’s day two of The X Factor auditions, and more than 4,000 fans and hopefuls have descended upon the arena armed with handwritten cardboard signs (“Will you go to the prom with me, Simon?”) and unbroken dreams. Music is pumping—Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” and One Direction’s “What Makes You Beautiful”—and the hypeman’s mere mention of Justin Bieber sends girls into full-out tizzles.

Finally: “Are you ready to meet the judges?!”

Demi Lovato emerges first, followed by newbies Paulina Rubio and our lady of the hour, Kelly Rowland. (Simon Cowell is running late.) It’s almost time...
appropriate that Kelly bring up the rear: She's a towering presence, and not just because her red Giuseppe Zanotti pumps with the gold chain in detail tip her statuesque 5’7” frame to just over 6 feet. She's wearing a Stella McCartney minidress—leopard print on the front, black-and-white checks in the back—that makes her legs seem even longer. A puff of loose curls are gathered atop her head and accented by a gold hairpin. Mouth painted a strong orangey red, she looks every bit like the pretty brown-skinned girl Roy Ayers sang about.

This has been Kelly's life, three times a week, 12 hours a day for weeks during the regional auditions. Not to mention she's in the middle of promoting her fourth solo effort, Talk a Good Game. It's interesting to watch Kelly here, amid the pandemonium. As one third of Destiny's Child—one of the top-selling vocal groups of any genre—she's pop royalty. At this judge's table, she possesses a straight-spined authority that comes with having 20 years in the business and being in your thirties. Her performance notes are often a mix of technical advice (“Watch your use of vibrato,” she advises one riff-happy contestant) and sugared encouragement. For example, when country singer/bartender—Broadway performer Rachel from Nashville tells the judges she's competing because, at age 29, she's no longer a "spring chicken" and needs help, Kelly asks, "Honey, what's the point of being a spring chicken when you can be a fine wine?"

But don’t write off Rowland, 32, as merely a nice girl. When it’s her turn to critique the 36-year-old dental assistant who has ruined Celine Dion’s "The Power of Love,” Kelly says nothing. Instead, she slurps the last of whatever she’s been sipping in her paper cup. "Oooool the audience instigates. Kelly shrugs. "That actually sounded better,” she says.

A few days later, we're at Koi, a Japanese restaurant in downtown Manhattan, and Kelly is taking off her three massive gold rings—a tiger's head, a crown and the eye of God—preparing to show down like the shameless southern girl she is. She’s had a long day—first The Wendy Williams Show, then her Essence cover shoot and now this interview—so Kelly has worked up an appetite. "Do you want to try the potstickers?" the waiter asks. "Yes, I do!" says Kelly. "What about the crispy rice? Get that, get that." Dragon roll? "No, I want this Northern Lights snow crab, cucumber avocado with salmon and—she sings—"black truffleeeee. Anything to drink?" "Nah. Perhaps the lychee martini?" "Ding, ding, ding!" How about a baked crab roll? "Aaww, see? Look at you talking to me dirty,” Kelly says, winking at the waiter. "I like it, boo."

Good thing she's dressed casually, though fashionably, in baggy, strategically ripped jeans, a sleeveless white tee, a light camouflage jacket, a red plaid button-down tied loosely around her waist and black Jordans. Her look falls somewhere between 1980’s grunge and L.A. Mexican gangbanger, if not for her pale pink stiletto nails and gold jewelry, including a showstopping Celine link bracelet. "It's like my favorite thing," Kelly says.

The singer is in good spirits despite the sad news that her 83-year-old maternal grandmother, Ella Mae Rowland (affectionately called GranGran), passed away recently. "You gotta see this," Kelly says. On her phone, she plays a video of GranGran sitting in a chair, with Kelly and her cousin Sha asking her off-camera to sing the Trinidad James lyric, "Gold all in my chain." GranGran obliges just once, and the women laugh.

I ask, "Was this the grandmother you once mentioned who taught you how to be stylish...?"

Kelly cuts me off. "She's the only grandmother I ever mention."

One gets the sense Rowland doesn't feel much like pretending these days. When I ask her last time she spoke with her estranged father, she says, "I haven't. I don't know what's stopping me because I've had opportunities. But it really is time. I probably need to ask my therapist about it."

It's also been an uncharacteristically emotional time in public—crying onstage at a recent concert and caught by the paparazzi shedding a tear on a Venice, California, street after a birthday lunch with sister friend and bandmate Beyoncé and her husband, Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter. Such nakedness (TAGG's provocative album cover notwithstanding) is a marked change from the impenetrable and somewhat predictable media-trained icon we've come to expect. And guess what? We love it. Not Kelly crying. Kelly just being—Kelly. I remind her of the slurp at The X Factor, and she shaves her head. "My manager said, 'Okay, that was just rude,' " she says, laughing. "But that performance was awful."

Then Kelly gets serious. "I was 12 years old when I got into the music business," she says. "Getting constructive criticism is just the way the entertainment industry is. I have listened to what a whole bunch of people have had to say—good or bad—about me, whether it's about the way I look or an album or the people I'm friends with. I'm supposed to take that knowledge away. I don't think God sends you through all that for you to keep it to yourself. That said, I also want people to have fun and enjoy watching the show. And if that means slurping to tell somebody to be quiet, then awesome.

Folks, meet the millennial Kelly Rowland.

By the time you read this, Kelly's lead single, "Dirty Laundry," will have been through the spin cycle. In the song, the singer speaks about being in an abusive relationship while working through conflicting feelings of being happy for Beyoncé's
success and fearing for her own uncertain path. It's a story Kelly says she has discussed "over and over and over...." She feels that in all the talk, the lyrics—particularly the phrase "while my sister was onstage/killing it like a mother/I was enraged/feeling it like a mother"—were taken out of context.

"You get your early twenties to mess up," Kelly says, sighing. "And for a long time I wasn’t happy, but that had nothing to do with Beyoncé. That had to do with me trying to get my life in order and make better decisions for myself. I'm seeing all these wonder-

There should always be a Crazy Town in you, kid," Kelly says, imitating Snow, taking on his rough Brooklyn accent. "You need Crazy Town, just to know you can go there. Cause then people will know they can't run over you."


"When I'm not coming hard enough, he says, 'You have to now that you're strong enough to do all of this, kid. Don't you want to be great? You're not number two, kid. You're number one. You were number two for so long. You're not number two for no more. You're number one.'" Here Kelly punches her fists together. "Let's go! Let's go!"

"I see the beauty in boxing," she adds, easing out of her possession. "It teaches me strength, physically and mostly mentally. I had to learn my strength, because for so long I could have been tougher than I was."

Ultimately, Kelly Rowland is a lover, not a fighter. She is, in fact, dating a man she describes as "mature" and "very cute." (She even used the "L" word on Wendy. But if you're waiting for her to name names, ruggedaboutit. Homegirl ain't changed that much.) True to her Aquarian nature, Kelly is looking toward the future. "When I turn 50, baby, it's over! I'm going to cut all my hair off and I'm going to get me a real fly sports car. Hopefully by then I'll have a kid, and he or she will be like, 'Ma, please go sit down somewhere.'"

Kelly says she'd like to marry and experience motherhood like her besties LaLa Anthony and Bey. "I want to be in Miami chilling with a cute little tummy wearing cute little dresses on the beach," she says. "And I want to be married. I do."

For now, Kelly's just focusing on being herself. Kelendria. A brown girl from Atlanta who moved to Houston when she was 8, destined to become a star. "Kelendria is the core of who I am because my mama gave me that name," she says. "Kelendria doesn't feel the need to put on sometimes like Kelly, like I was taught." Our woman of the hour pauses to consider her statement. "Not taught but just what you learn growing in the music industry," she clarifies. "Kelendria is just like"—shrug—"Hey."

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