From Destiny’s Child to music queenmaker: Kelly Rowland has a new handpicked girl group

When Kelly Rowland at age 11 joined a group of spunky Houston preteens called Girls Tyme, no one could have imagined they’d become one of the biggest girl groups in music history.

It happened after the group lost “Star Search” and emerged as the teenage R&B quartet Destiny’s Child in 1997. DC won Grammys, released era-defining hits, sold more than 60 million records and even turned its most infamous blemish (lineup switches and messy lawsuits) into a signature hit.
When its members — Rowland, Michelle Williams and Beyoncé (who inserted that "Star Search" loss into her bold anthem "Flawless") — disbanded in 2005 for solo pursuits, the era of girl groups faded.

Rowland is hoping to change that with a new group she’s handpicked and mentored through her BET reality show “Chasing Destiny.”

"I've been feeling like there was a void in the marketplace in girl groups," the 35-year-old says. “It was time.”

Rowland is perched on a table inside a Santa Monica recording studio (a plaque for her former group’s 2002 remix album hangs in the studio’s lobby). She’s surrounded by Brienna DeVlugt, Ashly Williams, Kristal Lyndriette, Shyann Roberts and Gabrielle Carreiro, the five women she’s chosen for the group that already had a commitment from Epic Records even before the selection process began.

Kelly Rowland and choreographer-creative director Frank Gatson Jr. built and nurtured a girl group on the BET docuseries “Chasing Destiny.” (BET)

Since April, the early stages of the quintet’s inception has unfolded via the 10-part BET docuseries that follows Rowland and choreographer-creative director Frank Gatson Jr. as they build and nurture the group.

With this week’s conclusion of the Tuesday-night show’s first season, the new group will be launched into the ultimate reality showcase — the pop music marketplace.

Created and executive produced by Rowland, the series has been driven by the singer’s desire to see a group of women — particularly black women — showcase the sisterhood, female empowerment and talent that steered En Vogue, TLC, SWV, Xscape and her own group to the top of the charts.
“There’s something exciting about hearing different voices in one song,” Rowland says. “I just feel like there’s more to offer. There should be more than two.”

The two groups she’s referencing, Fifth Harmony and U.K. sensation Little Mix, are anomalies in a sea of short-lived, mostly forgettable collectives that have failed to make a splash in recent years. (Last year, Fifth Harmony notched the first top 20 single by an all-female group in the U.S. since the Pussycat Dolls in 2009.)

Rowland had wanted to develop a group since the Destiny’s Child final tour concluded, but only started seriously considering the idea after the birth of her son, Titan, in 2014.

While filming the process for TV tapped into the market that’s long been the main breeding ground for recent girl and boy groups (Fifth Harmony, Little Mix and One Direction were all assembled on different editions of the reality competition series “The X Factor”), Rowland’s decision to make a show out of the group’s formation spoke closer to the business savvy she’s gathered over 20 years in the business.

“I love the idea of TV because when it’s time to break [an artist], labels talk about how there’s not enough money in the budget,” she explains. “So I thought, what else could I do to ensure more promo that they don’t necessarily have to pay for, that creates more eyeballs — and gets the label excited as well.”

Under Rowland’s guidance, “Chasing Destiny” eschews the typical talent competition format. “I don’t want reality stars; I want stars,” Rowland declared in the pilot.

Halfway during the series’ run, Rowland unveiled the group. Two of the women are L.A. locals, with Carreiro growing up in Glendale and Williams, a former “X Factor” contestant, hailing from Compton. Nearly all had previous industry experience. Lyndriette is the most familiar face as part of the promising but short-lived R&B group RichGirl, which once toured with Beyoncé — an experience that didn’t dissuade Lyndriette from trying out. (“Not one second,” she says. “I loved my group, and I wanted the opportunity to do it again.”)

There was no drama, no wretched auditions shown for laughs nor humiliating eliminations.

Instead, the series focused on the process: Rowland and Gatson combing through talent, rehearsing them endlessly, offering constructive criticism, introducing them to industry giants (New Edition and En Vogue made appearances) and preparing for their debut.
“It was graceful to say the very least,” Carreiro says of the experience. “The cameras were just there. They didn’t tell us what to do. It wasn’t formulated in any kind of way. It kept us on our toes.”

“If [Kelly and Frank] felt like we needed an elimination because you’re not the right girl, there was an elimination,” Williams adds. “If they felt we needed to get our dancing together, we did that. It was very true and real to how the music industry is, but very fast.”

Nurturing and uplifting the women, even if they didn’t progress, was paramount, Rowland says. One hopeful was eliminated because Rowland wanted to build a different group around her. And unlike many of these shows, the cameras weren’t continuously kept rolling.

“People had seen these shows. What could I do to make mine different? I wanted more spontaneity. I wanted it to be shot differently. I wanted it to feel authentic. I wanted it to be right in the thick of everything,” Rowland says. “It would be easy for me to tell girls ‘no’ if I’m sitting behind a desk and they are up there [onstage]. I wanted the experience to be different.”

“Chasing Destiny” ranked No. 1 in its time period among black women in the 18-49 demo, and the still-unnamed group’s first offering, a lush a cappella rendition of Drake’s “Hotline Bling,” went viral when it was released online last month.

The real test, however, is the music.

Over a two-month period the group recorded more than 30 songs — half of which were submitted to Epic head L.A. Reid.

Rowland’s husband and manager Tim Witherspoon, who also serves as an executive producer on the show, sighed with relief when discussing Reid’s reaction to the music. And Rowland herself gleefully danced around the studio as the group’s A&R person played a batch of records that will most likely be included on its forthcoming debut. The ladies sang and riffed with one another as each song played.

The group worked with a slew of in-demand hitmakers (Harmony Samuels, Dem Jointz, Stereotypes and DJ Camper are among their collaborators) for the project, which feels like an updated take of the edgy pop-oriented R&B of Destiny’s Child and SWV with the bite of Total, TLC and the short-lived Electrik Red.

“He might fool you from the way he talk below the waist,” they advise on the fiery women’s anthem “L.A.N.C.E.” (two of the words are unprintable here, but its abbreviation describes an unfaithful man).
Kelly Rowland’s new all-female group landed a label deal before the singer even picked them. From left: Shyann Roberts, Ashly Williams, Brienna DeVlugt, Gabrielle Carreiro and Kristal Lyndriette. (Epic Records)

Between the sassy, bouncy “Wrap Around”; the sensual slink of “Facts”; bass-rattling bangers “You Know Why You Calling” and “Problem”; and “Ratchet Life,” a smartly written number that sees the women offering tough love to a friend, the group is intent on delivering on Rowland’s promise.

They still need a name though.

Rowland says they came close with 1310, their first apartment together, but superstitions over the number 13 made them rethink it.

The group might not have settled on a name, but is anxious for its debut.

Its first single will arrive soon and the group’s debut TV performance (as of now) is set for “Greatest Hits,” ABC’s upcoming summer music series that has contemporary artists and heritage acts performing records that defined the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s (the group will pay homage to En Vogue while its label mates Fifth Harmony will perform a Destiny’s Child medley).

“I want them to see just as much or more than DC or En Vogue or TLC or any of us have,” Rowland says. “I just think it’s that time again. I want them to see the world. And once they conquer it — do it again.”