

Beyonce: Crazy in Love

Uh-Oh, Uh-Oh, Uh-Oh!

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Because of her position as the pre-eminent singing sensation of the year, there are many hurdles you must leap before you can be ushered into the presence of Beyoncé Knowles. The last of these is an exceptionally tall and fat man called Shorty, who protects his charge and precedes her every move. She goes on a theme park ride for an MTV programme and Shorty rides too. She attends a film premiere in Leicester Square, and the shadow in the photos in the papers the following day is Shorty's. She walks down the corridor backstage at Wembley Arena, and Shorty sweeps the way clear for her like that boulder in Indiana Jones .

When I first see him in the flesh, Shorty is sitting on a too-small plastic chair outside a door labelled 'Meet and Greet'. Not far away are eager competition winners being marshalled into small groups and instructed on etiquette. It's like meeting the Queen: don't say anything that might upset; no pawing.

'So,' I said as I entered the room. 'I met Shorty!'

'Oh, Shorty's more famous than I am,' Beyoncé replied. She was wearing a pink cardigan and dark jeans, all curled up in a large leather chair with her legs beneath her. 'Shorty's a relative of Michelle's in Destiny's Child,' she continued. 'Well, I'm not sure if they're actually related, but both he and Michelle are from Rockville, Illinois, which is a really small town and everyone's like family there.'

It was early November, halfway through her first solo UK tour. Things were going well, but life was hectic. The date and location of this interview had been changed four times because the schedule was packed to bursting, and during this time I had become familiar

with a few nuances of the Beyoncé travelling lifestyle. If something is '98 per cent certain to happen' in her world, it will almost certainly not happen. If it's 100 per cent certain, it may happen, but almost certainly not as planned. 'I'm so glad this interview is finally going to happen,' I said to the director of communications for Sony as we waited in a Wembley Arena bar waiting to be summoned towards Shorty. 'Shhhh!' he said. 'Tempting fate.'

Outside the meet-and-greet room my allotted time with her was truncated from 45 minutes to 20, with a promise to meet again, perhaps in Birmingham. How certain was this possibility? 'About 99 per cent,' which meant it was probably worth arranging a train ticket, but not overnight accommodation.

The tour had not started as planned because on the first night her road manager had fallen off the stage and smashed his back. But the recovery was swift, and by the third night everything was just like the manual, including the opening sequence in which Beyoncé appears from the roof and is lowered headfirst onto the stage in a harness, as if to deliver a nasty blow in a wrestling match.

'It's just unexpected and crazy,' Beyoncé explains. 'It was actually my idea - I saw it in a Broadway show and it looked really cool. I do it every night, and now I'm upset because it's not fun. I'm scared to eat too close to the time. It was OK the first time, but when you have to do it 30 times_' What does she think about when they're hooking her up in the ceiling? 'I'm like, "Oh God, I have to hang upside down now."'

This gimmick was for the song 'Baby Boy', the third single from her album *Dangerously In Love*. The whole show consisted of about two thirds of this album, a short sampling of Destiny's Child hits and an extended Michael Jackson tribute, and combined big Vegas-style choreography in which she sang with the aid of a backing track, and more intimate moments where she walked to the front of the stage and sang properly, a breathtaking display of emotion and exceptional talent.

Her day usually began at about noon, she said, and by 2pm her schedule kicked in - meeting people, making decisions about future engagements, soundchecking, recording Top of the Pops and the Lottery show, generally making a promotion of herself, gliding from one town to the next with natural light very rarely touching her face. 'I did go shopping for 30 minutes before the MTV awards in Edinburgh,' she admitted. 'I got some oils and some glasses.' She paused for a moment, as if wondering whether there was anything else she may have bought on that trip, like some huge diamonds or something. Then she said, 'Yeah, that's it.'

I asked her what she thought this was all about, and why she pushed herself so hard. 'When I was young,' she replied, 'my ambition was to get a recording deal and get a gold record and write a number one single. That was the only thing I wanted. And to win a Grammy. But as soon as you accomplish one thing, it's not enough.'

When she was even younger, before she knew what a Grammy was - at a time when R'n'B still meant Dr Feelgood - Beyoncé used to sit in the front room of her home in Texas and sing into a karaoke machine bought for when it was too hot to play out. 'I would be with it all day,' she explains, 'and tape myself over other people's songs and occasionally rewrite the words.' She didn't sing in church because it didn't have a great choir and it didn't perform the sort of gospel that had inspired her idols, such as Aretha Franklin and Anita Baker.

'So the karaoke was my joy. At school I was really quiet. I loved singing but didn't tell any of my friends about it, and I didn't regard it as anything special.' The machine had been carried into the house by her father Mathew, who worked in music management and wasn't slow to realise: Houston, we have a prodigy.

Soon there will be perfume and a clothing collection, and more so-so acting in movies, but at the moment we must make do with some fantastic music. In the past four years, solo and with

Destiny's Child, Beyoncé has sung, co-written and produced most of the dance songs you can't shake from your head: 'Bills, Bills, Bills', 'Say My Name', 'Jumpin, Jumpin', 'Survivor', 'Independent Women Part 1' and 'Crazy in Love'. The songs blend soul and gospel with rap and go-go, and they define a bold variety of urban stridency. Most of them are about more than bling and bragging, and they sell their lead singer in an appealing way, which is not always so with R'n'B. When Beyonce adapted 50 Cent's 'In da Club':

Go Shorty, it's Beyoncé/ We gon' party like it's ya birthday/ We gettin' naughty like it's ya birthday/ So put ya drink up in the air if you feel sexy!/...I'm the lady sipping Baileys while I strut like a model/ □If the ladies wanna hate me I jus' send them a bottle...

She turned around an aggressive track about drugs and casual sex into a flirtatious parody of rap culture. Also, that club: how much would you not give to be there with her?

She talks of these songs not as smash hits, nor in a boastful way, but as personal milestones, each one a little manifesto. I asked her about 'Independent Women Part 1', which turned out to have little to do with the Charlie's Angels soundtrack on which it featured. 'That came out of "Bills",' she said. 'That song was misunderstood. The song started off cool with this guy, but then he would use our car and not fill up the tank and use our phone to dial long-distance. But the chorus is so big that people didn't hear those words - they thought we were being gold-diggers. That always frustrated me, so I wrote 'Independent Women', you know, "Pay my own fun - oh, and I pay my own bills."'

'Survivor' sprung from the gloom that descended after splitting with two of the original members of Destiny's Child in 2000. When LaTavia Roberson and LeToya Luckett left the group amid musical differences and talk of Beyonce's father/ manager showing unequal favour, Beyoncé retreated to bed. 'I had hate websites, and a lot of pressure, and people blaming everything on me. I was 17, 18 years old, just an innocent person, a kid. That was a hard time for me.

My father is my manager and my mother is the stylist, so I felt it was my whole life, and when people were saying all these horrible things I felt that my life was being crushed.' She thought about the parallels with the Survivor series on television. 'People were trying to figure out who was going to be the last one on the island. So I took it and made a song.'

The names Roberson and Luckett have since been expunged from the record company's official Destiny's Child biography, as has that of Farrah Franklin who joined for under a year before the group decided they were happy as the trio (Beyoncé, her cousin Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams). The splits are talked of publicly as 'amicable', but this was not evident when 'Survivor' was released. All parties had agreed not to talk about their separation, but Roberson and Luckett sued Beyoncé for breaking the deal in song when they heard the refrain, 'You thought that I'd be stressed without you/ But I'm chillin'/ You thought I wouldn't sell without you/ Sold nine million.' On the way to an out-of-court settlement, Beyoncé argued that the words were impersonal, aimed at everyone in the industry who had doubted her staying power.

At this point in our interview Beyoncé's father Mathew Knowles walked in. He is a thin, wiry man, and he spoke softly in his daughter's ear. He did not exude the air of ruthlessness that has been cast upon him, and when he had left I asked her about his influence. 'Well, he's great. Obviously the older we got, the more in control we were. When we were 17 we trusted a lot of people and they made great decisions for us. But now, at this point, the schedule that I do - the magazines, the videos, the producers, the directors, the songs that make the album - everything - it's my career, so I have to want to do it. Other things I don't have time for my father will make decisions.'

She has been more gushing in song. A hidden track at the end of the solo album, which comes in 15 blank seconds after the last advertised song, is called 'Daddy': 'I remember when you used to take me for a bike ride everyday on the bayou,' Beyoncé sings.

'You've given me such security_ That's why I want my unborn son to be like my Daddy, I want my husband to be like my Daddy.'

After this, there is only one logical thing to do: play the CD again from the start, where the sampled horns from a 23-year-old song by The Chi-Lites announce the single of the year, her partnership with her boyfriend Jay-Z, 'Crazy in Love'. This had an unusual gestation.

'Before I started recording the album I had to figure out what producers to work with,' Beyonce explains. 'So I had meetings and interviews with every producer from the East Coast and every producer from the West Coast - all day for two days, every 30 minutes someone else. I met Rich Harrison maybe three months before I did the song, and he played me that track. When I heard it, I was like, "Oh my God, that's perfect." We just couldn't figure out what to write with it. I was looking crazy with my clothes. And I kept saying, "I'm looking crazy right now." I wanted to go out and buy Kelly a birthday present but I didn't want to leave the studio because I was scared that people were going to take pictures of me.'

What sort of crazy clothes?

'You know - things that weren't matching, my hair wasn't combed, just looking crazy! And he said, "That's the hook!" And I'm like, "Yeah, right." Then he starts singing, "I'm looking so crazy right now," and I'm like, "That's hot!" Then came the "Uh-oh, uh-oh, you know" - that's the thing that makes people_ the catchiest part of the song. So we wrote that and that was that.'

Two days later in Birmingham her fans were younger, but everything else looked the same: the long corridor with Shorty at the end of it, another gaggle of nervous fans in the corridor, the same aerial suspension at the top of the show. The meet-and-greet room had more candles and more of a boudoir feel, but its occupant was more tired and slightly less chirpy. The first time we met, at Wembley, she said, 'Haven't we met before?' to which I replied, 'I have one of those faces_' What I really should have said

was, 'Only in my dreams.' The second time, in Birmingham, I'm not sure she knew that we had met two days previously. She was in a tour daze.

She was curled up again in a soft jogging suit, straight brown hair unchanged, no makeup or jewellery. 'I shouldn't really be talking,' she says, 'because my voice is going and my voice coach told me to stop talking three days ago.' She talked about how there will be a new Destiny's Child album next year, but perhaps another solo one first. She mentioned that she felt compelled to shake everyone's hands at the London premiere of her new film *The Fighting Temptations* in which she appears as a small-time jazz singer pursued by Cuba Gooding Jr: 'It took 40 minutes. I had on a black Versace suit - thank God, because it was cold out there!' She said her clothing and perfume lines were still about a year away: 'All I know is that anything I put out I would want to wear myself, because it's hard to find everyday clothes sometimes because I'm curvier.' She explained how much she was looking forward to meeting Nelson Mandela when she sang at an Aids benefit concert in Cape Town. And in response to a further question about what she really wanted to achieve with all her relentless work (I wanted the answer, 'Money, just money!') she said: 'For one, when I get on the stage I feel free. For two, I have fun in the studio. And for three, I want to work hard now so I can settle down in a few years and commit everything to my family and husband hopefully and kids. I'm working now so I can rest later.'

Almost everything was great all the time, but a few problems brought her down when she thought about them. She was struggling to keep hold of her private life, and she didn't like it when mad stuff appeared in the papers about her. Most of the examples she gave were amusing - 'When I shake my butt I feel it in my soul' - but she also said: 'I'm grateful [for the attention] but I'm scared. It's a lot. It's overwhelming. Along with the good come all these people who want something from you. They are searching for stuff, and I just feel that there's certain things I can't control any more.'

She told me she didn't like it when people thought her raucous videos and butt-shaking were somehow indicative of how she lived her private life, but admitted it was hard to have it both ways.

What she really didn't like was the thought that she had betrayed her upbringing, or sold her soul. 'I grew up very close to my family and I still am,' she reasoned. 'We went to church every Sunday - that was our big time together, church and then eating together. I still do that. I always knew, since I was nine, that I wanted to be an R'n'B singer. I never thought that once I become an R'n'B singer I can't believe in God any more. People that don't know me might think...but my parents know me, and my friends know me, and it makes complete sense to them because they know how I live my life.

'Other people...' she trails off, calibrating how best to sum up the cherished image held by the millions who buy her records and the hundreds of thousands who may soon buy her diffusion range of fashion and scents. Her public persona, she concludes, 'is distorted so that people can be entertained. At this point I don't try to make it less confusing because I can't prove anything to anybody and I don't feel I need to'.