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While she was voted most probable to be a pop star in high school, it wasn't until Kelela was in her late 20s, after college at American University in Washington DC that she started taking her singing seriously. Her debut mixtape, *Cut 4 Me*, marries her '90s-inspired R&B vocals with new dance beats produced by the Night Slugs and Fade to Mind collectives.

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Kelela says she wants to make people cry in the club, no wonder some call her “the melancholic Mariah.” Kelela’s not afraid of being compared to her heroes, she channels them and wants to speak their language. But in her own, native tongue. And as we chatted, the portrait of an artist-to-watch began to unfold.



“Quiet strength. That’s what I wanted to convey through my voice.”

Lisa Rovner Less than a year ago, you were working as a telemarketer in Los Angeles. You are thirty now and only started singing seriously a few years ago. How inspiring! It’s never too late, is it?

Kelela No, it’s never too late. I know what it’s like to feel like you haven’t started the thing you are most passionate about. There were obstacles, I didn’t have the skill. I could sing a melody but I couldn’t project, I could only sing it quietly. Yesterday I was with some friends and we were talking about that journey, about how jolting it can be to undertake a completely different medium that nobody knows you for, how intimidating that can be. But this wouldn’t be happening right now if I hadn’t gone through all the other shit. It does work out if you really want it to work out. That’s the bottom line.

Lisa There must have been some advantages coming into it later.

Kelela There’s definitely a clarity I would not have had at twenty-two. With my producers, we deal as equals. That’s why it was synergistic.

Lisa I recently interviewed Lake Bell about her movie, *In A World*. One of the interesting points the film makes is that young women today aren’t using the power of their own voice to its full potential. The main character says, “The power of a great voice is not only a blessing, it’s a choice.” What choices did you make about your voice when you decided to take singing seriously? In other words, what kind of a woman did you want to sound like?

Kelela Because I come from the jazz world, I wanted to sound on point. I wanted to hit the notes. I had to learn how to sing. Stylistically, I wanted to convey strength, but not by power singing. I wanted to express strength in holding back, in minimalism. Quiet strength. That’s what I wanted to convey through my voice. Also, vulnerability. All the music that got me through some shit, that’s been a part of my life, albums I can’t live without, those albums usually deal with imperfection. It’s the vulnerability in those albums that I’m obsessed with. I wanted to speak that language. The space that D’Angelo is coming from on *Voodoo*. The whole vibe of “I’m not on top of this love affair” the “I’m okay with putting it all out there,” I really appreciate that in songwriting. It’s therapeutic.

Lisa Art can help one suffer more successfully.

Kelela Totally. And that’s central to what happened, to where I was

trying to come from. I wanted my voice to be honest, comfortable with being vulnerable.

Lisa In a radio interview I heard on BBC 1, you describe your singing method as “channeling.” Who are the singers you are channeling? And what is it about their voices that made you to want to channel them, as you say?

Kelela There’s Mariah, for her phrasing, she does a lot of feel-good phrasing. Her airy tone is something that affected me and that I imitate regularly. When I was working with Ezra [Rubin], I was totally channeling Mariah. Janet—[Kelela breaks into song] that’s me doing Janet. Before I started writing I felt insecure about imitating, I thought: “When’s my voice going to come up?” When you put all the voices together, chunks of Mariah, and chunks of Erykah Badu, and chunks of Faith Evans, and boil it, sometimes you get a bite of

“Sometimes you get a bite of Faith, or a bite of Tamia.”

Faith, or a bite of Tamia. I’m channeling the intersection. Like this is me doing Aaliyah and Michael Jackson at the same time. It’s almost uncomfortable until I name it. I can approach the same song with more gusto, once I’ve named it. Sometimes I ask myself: “What would Rihanna do?”

Lisa What seems to differentiate you from some of your contemporaries is that your voice doesn’t sound synthetic or overly polished. It sounds real. So many voices these days are auto-tuned and soaked in effects. Was this a conscious choice?

Kelela I’m attracted to effects but only when they are used in a deliberate way, like an instrument. It’s not that I’m not interested in them at all, it’s just that I like using them in deliberate ways. Generally speaking, when it comes to innovative electronic music, voice is always doctored. The vocal falls back and takes a back seat.





It becomes ambiance. I want the whole thing together to create the ambiance. That was one of our goals with the mixtape.

Lisa The last couple of years have been a kind of golden age for R&B artists experimenting with dance music. You originally wanted to be a jazz singer. How did you get into dance music and what was it that drew you specifically to Night Slugs and Fade to Mind, the producers you worked with on the mixtape?

Kelela The first time I heard them play was on New Year's Eve into 2012. I remember hearing a Kelly Rowland edit over some grime beat. Kingdom was playing and I ran up to him and said "Can you tell me who did this?" and he was like "I did." And I was like "Oh my God." The vocal was not sped up or anything. It was all the way up front. The track was killing, murdering. And then he played another Mariah and Nicki Minaj edit. Nguzunguzu also deejayed that night.



Cut 4 Me (2013)

They were attracted to all the vocal stuff that I liked. They appreciate melody and R&B vocal performance in the way that I do, and then there's this other knowledge of the tracks, of the production side. A lot of the busyness in the mids is taken out of the track so that the vocals are situated between the high-end melodic elements and the drums. I'd done a mixtape prior, where I'd find tracks on Myspace and write over them and then send them to the producers. I was on this mission at the time to find a project where the production is on par, on the same level as the vocal. So that they're not actually competing with each other, so that it sounds like one piece.

Lisa You described Fade to Mind as the "jazz of club music." Can you elaborate on that?

Kelela I'm thinking about the element of surprise. The relentless-ness in the drums. The abstract choices of minimalism, of holding



back, of not doing what you want or expect. I learned to appreciate that from jazz. Night Slugs and Fade to Mind are gratifying in a lot of the same ways jazz is but it sounds new. Something is really being pushed.

Lisa When asked about your writing process, you said, “I don’t write lyrics. I hear the track and sing in gibberish over it,” that, “everything is left to chance.” Having studied Political Science in DC at American University, I was wondering if you considered the messages your lyrics carry?

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Kelela Melody, phrasing is left to chance. So when I walk into a session, I do my most intuitive go at the track. I record a gibberishy vocal pass over the instrumental, that doesn’t say anything. But then when I write the lyrics, I’m thinking about women singing the lyrics. I want to write lyrics that I would feel happy about women screaming in their cars or in the club, or when they’re in their room. It matters that it’s coming from an empowered place, one that speaks to being responsible for what’s going on in your life. If something sounds damsel-y, I change it. I try to make it void of typical chokes.



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Lisa Do you believe that music has the potential to bring about social change?

Kelela I do. When I was in college, I'd write songs about how fucked up things going on in the world were. That's what my first songs were referencing. My songs now are not an overt pursuit of the political—overt political messages don't resonate with a lot of people.

Lisa As a singer and performer, you have to grapple between person and persona, the private and public self, the inner world and its outer expression. Do you think of your songs as self-portraits?

Kelela They are definitely self-portraits. They are conversations with myself. I try my best to talk about the hard things. The songs are so much about how I think about the world, how I process my reality. I have a critical block when it comes to writing about someone else's reality. It would just be weird. Maybe it will happen one day.

Sometimes I ask myself: “What would Rihanna do?”

Lisa In one interview you said that you practiced singing in front of the mirror your whole life. When you are performing, do you feel the need to invent a character?

Kelela No. I feel very much the same. It's just me. If anything were to be appealing about it, is that it's the real thing.

Lisa You've mentioned how profound an effect the Tracy Chapman album cover from 1988 had on you. What was it about that album cover that moved you?

Kelela It wasn't gender specific. I didn't know. I had questions. It seemed so mysterious. Why is her head down? She looks like a boy. In a five year-old's world of pink, ponytails and bows, it was another representation. I like my masculine side. I'm comfortable with not adhering to bodycon silhouettes or dressing for my shape.

Lisa There is a great *New Yorker* article published in 2012 called

“Song Machine,” about “top line” writer Ester Dean, a songwriter and vocalist, who is behind Rihanna's “Rude Boy,” and Nicki Minaj's “Super Bass,” and many others. It's an incredible inside look on how music is made today. My question is this, would you ever consider working with a top line writer, as many R&B stars do today?

Kelela I do work with them. I worked with a few people who do that in L.A.

Lisa What's it like?

Kelela It's amazing. Some people have a real knack for what could go next, how people will hear it, what will feel good, they just know. It's really cool to work with people like that. Often they suggest choices that will make it pop. The only thing to be had is positive things.

Lisa Song writing is a real science.

Kelela That's the idea.

Lisa You have a musical background, right?

Kelela I played the violin until twelfth grade, I could read music but I never studied voice. So I can't sight sing. I didn't go that far in my musical studies. But I can hear things. Ear training comes from playing a string instrument.

Lisa Do you think you'll ever want to make your own beats?

Kelela I edit tracks with the producer there. I suggest and guide so I do produce in that sense. I'll also edit my vocal stems for timing. Intonation and timing informs the feel of a track. But I don't know how to use Ableton well enough. I have to convey things with sentences. I want to spend my time on vocals. I'm very focused on vocals.

Lisa Brian Wilson said: “It was a childhood dream of mine to make music that made people feel loved.” What about you Kelela, what do you want people to feel when they hear your songs?

Kelela To feel love is so broad. I want to be specific. The thing that comes to mind is feeling okay about not being perfect. I want people to feel okay about imperfection. Perfectly imperfect. I want to make people feel okay about not feeling 100 per cent. It's everybody's experience but it's not the go-to in songs. Especially when talking about romance. ♡