

Kelly
Clarkson

**MRS.
INDEPENDENT**

THE QUEEN IS BACK—WITH A NEW LABEL, A NEW ALBUM, AND A NEW GIG ON *THE VOICE*. (BUT ALL THAT FAMILIAR TALENT AND FEROCITY? STILL FULLY INTACT.)

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Kelly Clarkson
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KELLY CLARKSON WALKS INTO A NASHVILLE RECORDING studio and immediately announces that she's hungover. Not from alcohol, though—from NyQuil. She's been battling a particularly tenacious cold, and on this sweaty August day, she's feeling groggy and guilty for running a few minutes behind. "I feel cheated!" she tells a room that includes her husband and manager, Brandon Blackstock; her assistant; studio personnel; and part of her label team. "I didn't even get to get drunk." She's here to play me her new album, *Meaning of Life*, in the palatial Starstruck Entertainment complex where much of it was recorded. It's the first time she's shared the project with anyone

(PHOTO SHOOT: STYLING: CANDICE LAMBERT/THE ONLY AGENCY; HAIR: ROBERT RAMOS/CELESTINE AGENCY; MAKEUP: ASHLEY DONOVAN/CELESTINE AGENCY; PROP STYLING: RON ZAKHAR

(PREVIOUS SPREAD) DRESS: BOOTS: LOUIS VUITTON; CUFFS: JOVANI; (THIS SPREAD) DRESS: ADFULL; RING: GUCCI

outside of her label or family, so Blackstock has brought champagne to celebrate. Even though she's ill, Clarkson vows to take a sip and orders everyone to have some too, insisting that it's bad luck if we don't all partake. She eases onto a couch and shifts around in her seat because, oh, did she mention that she recently fell off one of her family's horses? "It bent my tailbone perpendicular to my spine!" she offers before accepting a glass. "Cheers!"

As an engineer readies the music, Clarkson blows her nose and apologizes for sounding like a mucous factory. Today, she's makeup-free in a floor-length black skirt, a black cardigan that obscures a graphic tee,

and a wide-brimmed black hat she says is covering up a bad hair day. "I'm swollen and snotty, but I'm very excited," she promises. And there's plenty to be excited about: *Meaning of Life*, out Oct. 27, is Clarkson's eighth studio album, but it represents a number of momentous changes in her 15-year career. Departing from the pop-rock sound that's helped her sell more than 25 million albums worldwide, the LP is a soulful urban pop record that imagines what kind of album Aretha Franklin or Whitney Houston would make today. It's also Clarkson's first album for Atlantic Records, which she joined last summer after an often tumultuous stint at RCA Records that begat some very public career battles. "This is a grown-ass-woman's record," she says. "This isn't a record I could have made at the age of 20. This is a record you make when you've lived."

Over the next hour and a half, Clarkson, 35, plays almost a dozen new tracks. During the fiery "Didn't I," she gets up to point out her favorite bass part and sings along to the track's backing vocals. In the middle of a sparkling midtempo stunner titled "Would You Call That Love," she stops the music and waves a Sharpie in the air as she promises to fix an improperly mixed vocal track that plays at an unusually high volume. Clarkson says this is the most fun she's had recording an album: "I've never been more proud of every single song." Recently, Clarkson's mother told her that this was the first time she could remember her daughter making an album without calling to cry about how it was going. "I think, 15 years later," Clarkson says, "I deserve it."



CLARKSON IS NO FOOL WHEN IT COMES TO RECORD DEALS. *American Idol* was her big break, but it wasn't her first shot at stardom. Before she won over Simon Cowell & Co. with covers of "At Last" and Madonna's "Express Yourself," Clarkson had already turned down a pair of label deals she says would have stipu-

lated everything from her sound to her weight. "My boobs weren't big enough, my hips were too big, 'We don't like this hair color,'" she says. "It was *particular*."

But even Clarkson couldn't have anticipated some of the issues she encountered over the next decade and a half thanks to what she calls the "arranged marriage" between her and RCA that resulted from her *Idol* victory. Most fans are already familiar with the turmoil behind 2007's *My December*: For that album, Clarkson co-wrote every song and pursued a heavier rock sound, reportedly against the wishes of legendary music exec Clive Davis, who Clarkson says wanted her to stick to more commercial material and, when she didn't, tried to sabotage the project. (Davis has previously acknowledged creative differences but denied sabotage claims.) Yet the struggles go even deeper than that. "People make fun of that show *Nashville*," she says, "and I'm like, 'The industry can be so much worse!' It can be so hard to find the light sometimes." (RCA declined to comment for this story.)

Every album, she says, involved compromises about the track list: To record the songs she wanted, she often had to record others she didn't. (Clarkson says she was once offered \$4 million to record a handful of tracks that were so horrible "not even the greatest vocalists on the planet" could have saved them.) Attempts to explore different sounds over the years, whether that meant more guitars or fewer guitars, were often met with resistance by top brass. It's why she calls her 2013 Christmas album, *Wrapped in Red*, her favorite record after *Meaning of Life*—no one cared what genre of music she recorded.

Clarkson also didn't always get final say over her collaborators. After 2004's *Breakaway*, she asked not to work with "Since U Been Gone" co-producer Dr. Luke because she found him demeaning and difficult in the studio. Yet Clarkson says her label forced her to reunite with him for her 2009 single "My Life Would Suck Without You." In protest, Clarkson says she refused a writing credit so

her name wouldn't appear next to his, even though she says she was instrumental in developing the eventual No. 1 hit. "If you heard the original version, you wouldn't have wanted to record it either," she says. "But I made it work because I didn't want the rest of the album to suffer for that." (Of Dr. Luke's current legal battle with Kesha, Clarkson says she has no insight but adds, "There are many people in the world to befriend, and he is not one of them.")

By the time she released *Piece by Piece* in 2015, her situation had improved—she says she had a good relationship with CEO Peter Edge, who took over RCA in 2011—but she still needed a fresh start. "[It had become] a bit of an abusive relationship emotionally and mentally," she says. "It starts to make you feel crazy. 'Am I being difficult?' You question yourself constantly. 'Is this me? What is happening?'"

What sold her on Atlantic was her initial meeting with chairman and CEO Craig Kallman, who told her the words she had longed to hear: that Clarkson's interest in recording different kinds of music was something to be embraced and capitalized on, not seen as an obstacle. That country album Clarkson has talked about doing for years? Kallman was all for it and started suggesting producers. And Clarkson's interest in Broadway? Kallman arranged for her to make her Atlantic debut with a song on *The Hamilton Mixtape*. "It was very important for her to call the shots and make critical decisions, at the highest level down to the smallest detail," Kallman says. "She's a remarkable artist in that way, having such a savvy big picture of what she wants to sing and who she is as an artist."

Clarkson sees a parallel between this new stage of her career and her *Idol* days, when each week had a theme, from '70s songs to Motown classics. In fact, her *Idol* background is precisely why Clarkson isn't worried about how fans will receive her new sound—music like this led nearly 9 million people to crown her a winner in 2002. "I got to showcase all these different sides of me," she says. "Artists never get the opportunity to do that the first time out the gate." And if the viral popularity of the covers she famously performs on her tours is any indication—look up her must-see renditions of Prince, Rihanna, and Dolly Parton—her fans are ready for whatever she

SONGS IN THE KEY OF LIFE

A preview of Clarkson's new album, *Meaning of Life*

"LOVE SO SOFT"

Produced by longtime collaborator Jesse Shatkin, the LP's first single shows off the full color and richness of Clarkson's voice—and deftly pays tribute to classic R&B while still sounding fresh.

"WHOLE LOTTA WOMAN"

"Texas women do it bigger," Clarkson howls on this brassy number, which uses Southern food as its central metaphor and features horn and bass contributions from Earth, Wind & Fire.

"MEDICINE"

Clarkson calls her vocal runs on this funky '90s-influenced track "so Mariah"—and her high notes will have you feeling plenty of "Emotions," too.

"I DON'T THINK ABOUT YOU"

When Clarkson asked songwriter Jessica Karpov for a Whitney Houston-esque ballad to showcase her range, Karpov penned this crown-jewel breakup anthem, whose lyrics were inspired by Clarkson's split with RCA.

"SLOW DANCE"

If there's a baby boom in July 2018, you'll know why: Clarkson has dubbed the guitar solo on this smoldering jam "the sexiest thing on the album."

"GO HIGH"

Co-written by Clarkson, this contemporary-sounding cut gets its name from Michelle Obama's "When they go low, we go high" speech and features a booming breakdown with chopped-up vocals.

wants to try next, too. America doesn't need a label to tell us Clarkson can do no wrong; America was on board from the beginning.



"I SHOULDN'T TALK AND DRIVE," CLARKSON WARNS AS SHE puts on her sunglasses and pulls out of the studio garage to take me to her home in a Nashville suburb. "Honestly, you're going to be fine. I swear to God I won't kill you." Clarkson has lived in Nashville since 2007. It was the next best place for a musician who didn't want to live in the industry bubbles of Los Angeles or New York, though the Texas native admits she moved here for more arbitrary reasons. While visiting the home of her business manager years ago, Clarkson enjoyed a glass of wine on her screened-in porch and realized that heaven probably looked something like this. "I literally decided that night and started looking for houses the next day with a Realtor," she says. "I moved here because of a screened-in porch and a really good glass of wine."

When she's out and about in the Nashville area—catch her at Target, usually pushing two carts of stuff—fans recognize and come up to her often, but she notes that they've always been respectful and unobtrusive. Every artist claims they have the best fans, of course, but Clarkson knows there's something different about the connection she has with hers: "I've been out with Blake [Shelton] or even Miranda [Lambert] or other people, and fans act different with other artists."

She thinks it's because she puts zero effort into maintaining a certain image ("I'm too lazy to have some kind of shtick") and because she already gives much of herself away through her music. These days, the song fans stop to talk to her about the most is 2015's "Piece by Piece," which recounts how her relationship with Blackstock, whom she wed in 2013, healed the wounds left by Clarkson's absentee father. "I'm always like, 'Thank you, and I'm sorry,' because it's not a particularly great song to relate to," she says. "But it's nice to know you're not alone."

Finding happiness with Blackstock and their kids—in addition to daughter River Rose, 3, and son Remy, 1, Blackstock also has children from a previous marriage, Savannah, 16, and Seth, 10—has led Clarkson to restruc-



DRESS: ELIAE LISQUE; VEST: REDEMPTION; BELT: ALICE AND OLIVIA; SHOES: GIUSEPPE ZANOTTI



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ture her creative process. She used to record mostly at night, but now she slots studio time roughly between drop-offs and pickups.

And where she once had to fight to write more songs, Clarkson felt empowered *not* to write for *Meaning of Life*. Instead, she met with groups of writers and producers to chat about what kind of songs she was looking for and what was on her mind. Some of the album's lyrics were pulled directly from these conversations, says Jessica Karpov, who

records as Harlee and who co-wrote a handful of songs on the LP. "The moment I met her she was like, 'You're like a little sister to me,' and we ordered some doughnuts and just hung out in the studio," Karpov says. "It's like, 'Oh my God, she's really human.'"

Though Clarkson ultimately co-wrote four songs on the LP, taking a more active role would have come at the expense of her family. "I don't want my kids to grow up with abandonment issues," she says. "I've been

searching for a family my whole life, because it was just me and my mom. It's a very important thing for me. It takes a lot of time to write—you never know when it's going to hit. I don't want to miss anything with my kids."



"THIS IS THE FLOOR I DON'T SHOW PEOPLE BECAUSE ALL MY s---'s up here and it's embarrassing," Clarkson says as she leads me into a stairway that



ABOUT THAT TWEET...

Clarkson looks back on the social-media smackdown that launched a thousand blog posts

Another reason Clarkson's excited about *The Voice*? The show's unique blind auditions, which appeal to her as a singer who's been subjected to myriad (unwanted) opinions about what a star should look like, most recently in July, when a Twitter troll called her fat. Her epic response? **"And still f---ing awesome."** The media widely praised her, but Clarkson says she was unaware of the reaction: "I didn't even know that one went viral until this moment!"

Attacks like these don't usually get to her. But in July, she'd had it—not just because the troll was responding to a July 4 tweet in which Clarkson thanked the armed forces for their service but because of her young female fans. "[They'll] say, 'If they think you're fat, what do they think about me?'" Clarkson says. "Your comment doesn't bother me, but it might impact other people. I need you to know words are powerful and have weight and gravity to them. So that's why I do it—but I also love being a smart-ass."

contains a fraction of the plaques she's earned over the years. She pauses to straighten a framed photo of her singing with Reba McEntire, who is one of Clarkson's idols and who used to be married to Blackstock's father. "It's stuff I'm proud of, but at the same time I don't want to look like a narcissistic asshole."

After a brief tour of her home that includes a stop at a closet-size makeshift studio where Clarkson often records vocals when she can't leave the house, we settle onto a living-room couch to discuss her other big career change: her return to television. In May—just two days after ABC announced that it was reviving *American Idol*—news broke that Clarkson would be joining *The Voice* next year as a coach on the show's 14th season.

Clarkson is the first to admit that an *Idol* comeback might be premature. "It's a little too soon, because I was pregnant with my son when it ended, and he's only 1," she says with a laugh. But really, the choice also came down to her home life. Because Blackstock also manages fellow *Voice* coach Blake Shelton, Clarkson is often on set with her children and is already well acquainted with the show's schedule and the people who work on it. In fact, Clarkson says she's actually been in talks with *The Voice* for almost four years but couldn't commit until now because of her pregnancies: "I want it to be a great experience for my whole family, and that's what I have to think about at this point in my life."

In recent years, TV talent competitions have struggled to produce stars at Clarkson's level. She's hoping that, as someone who has been through the TV wringer herself, she can change contestants' fortunes. Yet why Clarkson has succeeded where few *Idol* alumni have is something she isn't sure how to answer even now. Some of her success, she believes, comes from knowing when to stand up for herself—whether that's against label bosses, against Dr. Luke, or against Twitter trolls (see sidebar). "Everybody says, 'You're so brave, you're so fearless, you're the Joan of Arc of the music industry,'" she says. "I'm not. I just think it's obvious I said what I thought. I'm not a robot."

Another factor is her willingness to do the work and make the sacrifices that longevity requires. "A lot of people that I know, especially from *Idol*, don't necessarily want to be singers or artists; they just want to be famous," she says. "That is not going to bring you happiness. And a lot of it falls through the cracks because people make decisions based on what they think will make them famous instead of what will be good for them. I don't really care about being famous. I mean, *obviously*"—she gestures toward herself—"I'm not trying to impress anyone. I'm just me, and if you like that, cool. If you don't, that's totally cool too."

It's getting late in the afternoon now, and Clarkson is ready to end her pop-star obligations for the day and return to the family time she is so protective of. While I wait for an Uber to make the winding drive out to

her home, she invites me to hang out in her light-filled kitchen, where she and Blackstock are tending to their youngest. Clarkson has promised to play makeup with River, who earlier in the day crashed our interview to tell Clarkson that dinosaurs were knocking on the door. Remy looks on skeptically a few feet away, and Clarkson jokingly offers him some blush too. When it's time for Blackstock to walk me to the door, Clarkson hurries over for one last goodbye. She extends her arms for a farewell hug, and suddenly the words across her T-shirt are clear: *Never underestimate the power of a girl who knows what she wants.* ♦