



NOTES TO SELF

It looks as if being crazy in love is working for Beyoncé. She's back with a new double album and is ready to reveal the inner diva who was always destined for success

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Matthew Knowles, father of pop superstar Beyoncé, is speaking. Loudly. "For those who don't know me," his voice booms across the cavernous room, "I'm a little nuts."

After listening to him speak for a good half-hour about his eldest daughter and her impressive musical achievements, I'm inclined to agree.

A commanding and charismatic presence, Knowles has managed his daughter's career from day one and, after one of his speeches, it would be hard to believe you haven't loved Beyoncé forever, regardless of your previous musical tastes. That, of course, is his intention. Towering over his audience, dressed in a dark suit and tie, he comes across as a little preacher-ish, so it's disconcerting to be watching Beyoncé's latest video for 'Single Ladies' in his presence; throughout the clip, she bumps and grinds, sporting not much more than a PVC bra, hotpants and spiky heels. Her father merely looks on, smiling proudly.

"Oh God, I'm scared," groans Beyoncé when I describe her dad's theatrics a little later. "I tell him constantly, 'Please don't try to be a comedian, because I can't stand it.' I mean, he's my dad, so I'm like, 'Oh God, what did you just say?' I send him notes to say, 'Please, don't try to be funny. Just tell 'em about the songs.'"

And that's what this small congregation has gathered for, in a sparse and chilly New York music studio; to listen to Beyoncé's latest offering, *I Am... Sasha Fierce*. The album comprises two discs: the first, *I Am*, is emotive, ballad-laden and vulnerable; while the other, *Sasha Fierce*, is more hip-hop, with a dance groove.

'Sasha Fierce', Beyoncé explains, is her alter ego - a character she summons when she needs to perform and who's been around since she was a teenager. It's a bold revelation, especially as part of an album. The last artist who went down this route was country-music star Garth Brooks, who took on the downright bizarre alter ego of an Australian rocker called Chris Gaines. Needless to say, conducting interviews as Gaines didn't work, and very little has been heard from Brooks since.

But this singer isn't afraid to reveal both sides. "I have two different extremes to my personality, so when you want to dance and when you want some hip-hop, and you want to feel like, 'Uh-huh, I'm feelin' it,' you have *Sasha Fierce*," she giggles. "And when you want to feel more emotional, you have *I Am*."

For Beyoncé, the 'Fierce' alter ego is more of a personal mantra, a bit of a rev-up (case in point: the character was in play at what was arguably her finest moment to date - the huge hit 'Crazy in Love'). "I wouldn't say I'm shy, but I'd say I'm a tad... I'm not going to say boring," she laughs, "but I'm a very normal woman. In the beginning, I used Sasha Fierce to protect Beyoncé."

The 27-year-old says inhabiting a 'character' makes it easier for her to go onstage and project an image she probably wouldn't be able to otherwise. "There's a certain confidence I gain from her," she explains. "If Beyoncé was onstage for two hours, I don't know whether it would be as interesting. I think people come to the show to be entertained. There are certain things I'd never say in my normal life; there are certain things I wouldn't wear."



(inset) Beyoncé says her relationship with hip-hop heavyweight Jay-Z has increased her confidence. The couple have been together since 2002 and had a low-key wedding in April.

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Today, though, wearing a short, shimmering, emerald green dress (with green nail polish in sartorial solidarity) and sky-high heels, she's undeniably stunning - ethereal, in fact. Her beauty is a bit like the elephant in the room. She maintains it's not something she ever thinks of, yet the cover of the *I Am* side of the album features her au naturel, hair pulled back off of her face, wearing minimal make-up. This, she explains, is her true side, and though she admits it was difficult to lay herself bare, both physically and emotionally, she felt the need to do it.

"It takes time for you to get to know yourself. I'm still growing, and I have a long way to go," she says. "I'm in a good place and I'm becoming more confident and more comfortable with revealing some of my vulnerabilities and my emotions."

The singer credits her marriage to hip-hop star Jay-Z as playing a part in her increased confidence, though she's quick to clarify that's not the sole factor. "I think it's important for a woman to be confident and whole before she can be someone's partner," she says. "I took my time. I didn't want to be married at 21; I didn't know what I wanted. To start sharing your life completely with someone else, you have to know who you are, so you can support the other person and be there when they need you. And, you know, Jay had to know who he was as well. It took us a while to reach that point."

They're an interesting couple: Jay-Z (born Shawn Carter), 39, hails from Bedford-Stuyvesant, an area of Brooklyn that's overrun with drug dealers and gangs (his songs hint that drugs were a part of his past).

She's the butter-wouldn't-melt girl from the middle-class suburbs of Houston, who had her heart set on a singing career early on. They've been together since 2002, and were married in April. They rarely talk about the other in interviews, and neither officially confirmed their marriage (Beyoncé only started wearing her wedding ring publicly in September). But, today, she brings up her husband's name regularly and says their relationship just "works". Are there kids on the horizon? "Well, I love being around my nephew. I love having family around," she grins, "so I'd say yes."

Growing up in Texas, far from the blinding lights of Los Angeles, Beyoncé managed to maintain some semblance of a normal childhood despite her early start in the industry. She says her parents never pressured her to perform (her younger sister, Solange, is also a singer); in fact, the first time they saw her sing onstage was at a dance concert. "I remember singing for my dance teacher, and she was like, 'Hmm, can you sing again?'" she recalls. "So she put together this performance and my parents were there. They'd never really heard me sing before, and they were completely shocked. It was actually my dance teacher who kind of kicked it off."

Indeed, her father says he was so surprised by the change in his usually quiet daughter, he turned to his wife and said, "Who the hell is that?"

At the age of nine, Beyoncé founded the group that would become Destiny's Child, after she met LaTavia Roberson at an audition (Roberson was later sacked by Knowles, who was the girls' manager). >

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Soon after, Kelly Rowland joined the group, and stayed for the duration. There were numerous line-up changes (usually effected by Knowles) before they settled on Beyoncé, Rowland and Michelle Williams.

During the early noughties, Destiny's Child became the biggest-selling female group in the world, with global hits such as 'Say My Name', 'Survivor' and 'Bootylicious', but there was never any denying who the star of the show was. Like Diana Ross and The Supremes – to whom the group were so often compared – they were dogged with questions about when Beyoncé would go solo. There were whispers that the 'retirement' of the group was down to her – because without her, there was no Destiny's Child. But the singer is frustrated by her reputation for being diva-ish and difficult, calling it a classic case of double standards.

"Oh, I've had a bad rep in the past," she says, with a bemused smile. "If you're a man, it's not the same. It's amazing – even being around Jay, some of the things that he can say... No one blinks an eye. The paparazzi aren't as aggressive as they usually are with me if he's around. Interviewers don't ask him certain things because he's a man, or he has the right to do certain things that if I did, it would be, 'Oh, she's a bitch, she's a diva, she's a so-and-so.'"

Appropriately, a track called 'Diva', which appears on *Sasha Fierce*, is her attempt to reclaim the word from its unfavourable connotations. "That song is

"Every man connects to it," she continues, "and men are like, 'You know what? I do that and it must be tough being a woman. We do some things that maybe we don't have to do, so maybe we should change these things about ourselves' – and I'm happy about that."

These days, happiness is a priority for the singer. "I feel happiness is a choice," she says. "Everyone has something to complain about, to be depressed about, but you have to focus on the positives."

Aside from the music and films, Beyoncé is also quite the philanthropist. Along with Rowland, she set up The Survivor Foundation to help victims of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, and established a youth community outreach centre in Houston. The singer has also been involved in World Children's Day, participated in food drives for the homeless and travelled to South Africa on numerous occasions, where she's helped raise awareness of the fight against AIDS and the extreme poverty that's stricken parts of the nation. She says she was inspired by the plight of the people in that country and her time there was an especially humbling experience.

"This is a place where people have nothing," she says. "If I'm honest with myself, I don't know how I'd survive [there], but they're the happiest people in the world – with nothing material. They're so rich in life and love. They live in the moment, and I'm inspired by that; it encourages me to do the same."

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basically flipping it around; it's me saying a diva is a female hustler. I hustle, I work hard, I'm strong just like a man and I'm going to take this word, diva, which is something they use negatively, and flip it around and bring it back," she laughs.

In fact, Beyoncé considers herself something of a crusader for women – for those in bad relationships and for friends she's seen go through bad break-ups. "I'm one of the female artists women go to when they need that strength, when they need to be reminded of how strong they are," she says. "I have a reputation for telling it like it is with guys and I'm fine with that; I love it. Sometimes they'll be really angry with me – it's a love-hate relationship – but somebody has to do it. Someone has to call them out. That's my job and I'm happy to do it."

The first single taken from *I Am*, 'If I Were a Boy', illustrates that point with simple, yet effective lyrics about double standards. "You can hear the pain in that song," she says. "It's not about infidelity; it's more about the emotionally abusive things men do to women, which are even more difficult at times to cope with than the obvious 'He cheated on me'. It's about taking advantage of somebody because you know they're going to be faithful and they're going to be good to you; it's about the fact that a man can get up and throw on a white T-shirt and be fine, and a woman... Well, we have to care about so many things.

But for Beyoncé, living her own life in the moment may have to wait. Right now, she's staring down the barrel of an upcoming year that has almost every waking moment booked solid. In April, we'll see her playing singer Etta James in *Cadillac Records*, a film based on the lives of several legendary US musicians. She'll also appear in *Obsessed*, in her first film role without any musical element.

Her singing alter ego (both of them) will also embark on a world tour, which should see her reach Australian shores late next year. But, before all that, there's the small matter of an inauguration ceremony for president-elect Barack Obama next month. She and Jay-Z campaigned staunchly for the incoming leader and, following his win, she publicly offered to volunteer at the event on January 20.

Whether or not her presidential ambitions are fulfilled, there's no doubt she's a performer in her prime and a woman who's comfortable in her own skin. She may reckon it's taken a while to reach this point, but now she has, she's relishing it. For Beyoncé, it's not all about the music; she has a grander plan. Hoping to avoid sounding trite, she acknowledges she's in a position to make a difference and to inspire others in a positive way. As her dad proclaimed earlier, "She's in a great place in her life – the best she's ever been." And who wouldn't believe him? **SM**

I Am... *Sasha Fierce* (SonyBMG) is in stores now.