

MISS CONGENIALITY

Despite being raised in a pop 'bootcamp' and selling millions of records as one of Destiny's Child, Kelly Rowland is far from a monster. But that doesn't mean she'll let her bandmates steal all the limelight. She talks to Kate Salter about her new record and her best friend Beyoncé

Kelly Rowland yawns for the third time in ten minutes. She catches her breath, her toffee-coloured eyes, peering at me from under a chequered trilby, disappear for a moment and her hand flies up to cover her mouth before she apologises, again.

It's understandable if Rowland, who arrived in London from Los Angeles yesterday afternoon from the set of her second feature film, is a little tired. She is only in Britain for the weekend, going straight from the airport to a rehearsal for an appearance on ITV1's *CD:UK*; followed by a live 'webchat' for the BBC and more filming. This morning before meeting me at the Sanderson Hotel in central London she was live on *CD:UK* and afterwards she has five live radio interviews before going to a rehearsal for tomorrow's live performance at One Big Sunday in Leicester. Before that concert she will conduct seven more telephone interviews and three more in the car on the way back to London, before flying back to continue filming in Los Angeles on Monday.

As one-third of the female trio Destiny's Child, Rowland is used to an exhausting schedule. For the past four years, she and her bandmates, Beyoncé Knowles and Michelle Williams, have enjoyed the kind of popularity comparable to the furore that surrounded the Spice Girls at the height of their success (even if Destiny's Child would never dream of including the lyrics 'zigzag ah' in any of their songs). They have sold more than 30 million records worldwide and have had more Number Ones in the American charts than any other female group; they sang at George W Bush's inauguration, and 12in plastic dolls have been manufactured in their image. They inspire hysteria in their army of teenage fans yet their records are mixed by cutting-edge DJs and even cynical 'style' magazines such as *The Face* sing their praises. They are the self-proclaimed 'number-one group in the world' but have a reputation for being unfailingly polite and patient. They sing convincingly about infidelity, heartache and lust yet while on tour will fly home to Houston, Texas, to attend a church service at St John's United Methodists Church. A recurrent theme in their songs is 'surviving'

yet they are still only in their early twenties (Williams is 23, Rowland 22, Beyoncé 21).

'I'm tired. But I'm happy,' Rowland assures me after plonking herself down on a sofa and stretching out her long legs on the coffee table in front of her. 'Me and the girls have come over here and done schedules even more intense than this.' At the moment 'the girls' are pursuing their solo careers before Destiny's Child reunites some time next year. Michelle Williams released a gospel album in April, Beyoncé Knowles's solo album was released in June, and Rowland is promoting the fourth single, 'Train on a Track', to be released from her first solo album, *Simply Deep*, which came out in February, went straight to Number One in this country and has already gone platinum.

But until the single 'Dilemma', featuring the St Louis rapper Nelly, was released last year, no one even knew Rowland could sing. She had always been eclipsed by the powerful lead vocals, beauty and sex appeal of Beyoncé Knowles, who fronts Destiny's Child and who, with her album *Dangerously in Love*, is currently monopolising the airwaves, magazine covers and music video channels. Rowland's short spiky haircut, with its slightly Texan-looking red streaks, her less voluptuous figure and the outfits that never seemed quite as spectacular as Knowles's, made her seem like a plainer, quieter sister. But today, when she totters into the room in Louis Vuitton stilettos, low-cut combat-style denim trousers, a tiny beige vest and a trilby over her now long, streak-free hair, she looks just as glamorous. When she watches Knowles's current video, in which Beyoncé writhes about in red stilettos and hotpants with the rapper Jay-Z, wiggling her bottom at the camera, doesn't Rowland ever feel like ringing her up and asking what on earth she thinks she's doing? 'No. I think her video is fabulous! But it is *fierce*! She's really letting them have it.'

Rowland and Knowles have known each other since they were eight and in interviews they usually say they think of each other as sisters. Kelendria Rowland, born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1981, moved to Houston in 1988 with her mother, Doris, after her alcoholic father walked





out. At church she met Beyoncé Knowles and the two nine-year-olds decided to form a pop group with two other girls, LeToya Luckett and LaTavia Roberson.

Shortly afterwards Rowland went to stay at the Knowles family home in Houston and has lived there since. 'My mom was a live-in nanny and her job was already intense so she couldn't run me back and forth to rehearsals,' explains Rowland. 'I remember one time I did miss a rehearsal and I was *furios*. I was crying. So she made the decision that I would go and stay with the Knowles for a month – except a month turned into 11 years!'

At the time, Beyoncé's father, Mathew Knowles, was selling photocopiers for Xerox, but had enrolled in a music-business management course. While the decision to form a group (and for Rowland to move in with the Knowles family) was partly based on the girls' own determination, it was also encouraged by Mathew Knowles, who, as well as managing Destiny's Child, now manages the solo careers of each band member. Knowles is often portrayed as a ruthlessly ambitious showbusiness father who instilled in his daughter and her bandmates an almost absurd sense of duty and fear of failure – while other girls the same age were taking Barbie on picnics, Beyoncé, Kelly and friends were listing their 'lifetime achievement goals'. In 1992, after the four young girls had been invited on to a television talent-spotting show – and lost – Knowles left his job, sold the car, moved the family to a smaller house and became the group's full-time manager. 'If I could be the number one sales rep at Xerox, why would I fail at this?' he reasoned.

From the age of nine, the four girls would rehearse at Headliners Hair Salon, owned by Knowles's wife, Tina (who is still Destiny's Child's stylist and dreams up most of their outfits, even making many herself), asking the customers trapped immobile under their hairdryers to offer critiques of their routines. Knowles also devised 'summer camps' for the girls in the school holidays. When I ask what kind of summer camps these were, Rowland raises her eyes to the ceiling, throws her hands in the air and says, 'Oh my *God!* We would rehearse eight hours a day. *Little kids!* We were working so hard. We'd be, like, [in the voice of a headstrong 11-year-old], "We're going to go running early in the morning to improve our breathing technique, then we're going to rehearse for two hours, then we are going to have a quick 30-minute lunch break, and after that we're going to do more exercise, then after that we're going to go to voice-coaching, then we're going to watch our Michael Jackson videos, and after that we're going to have another *four hours* of rehearsals." That's how we put our schedule together.'

Surely children don't work that hard unless they are made to? 'We *wanted* to do it. I think that, when you have a great manager in your life, like Mathew Knowles, they see that potential. And even if you're giving just a little bit less, they're *still* gonna make you work – because they know your potential. It's not like he was cracking a whip on us, like everybody would love to believe.' Still, being forced to realise your potential can be a frightening thing when you are 11, especially if your own parents aren't around, and Rowland admits she was a shy child

who was very unsure of herself. 'I used to try and measure myself up to everybody, and I was constantly tearing myself down. I used to compare myself to celebrities, to friends at school, all the time. Beyoncé was much more confident. She was my same age, but she just had that leadership in her. I have to say, it took me a while.'

In 1996 their hard work earned Destiny's Child, now 14- and 15-year-olds, a record deal with Columbia Records: Knowles says Columbia decided to sign the group because they were so impressed by his 'guidance'; he had interrupted one of their auditions to berate the girls for having gone swimming the previous day – their voices were now 'congested'. In 1997 they had their first Number One with 'No, No, No', and a year later they released their first album, *Destiny's Child*. It wasn't until their second album, though, *The Writing's on the Wall*, which was released in 1999, that the band began to get rave reviews for their innovative blend of soul, R&B, rap and pop. *The Writing's on the Wall* went triple-platinum and won the band two Grammy Awards.

In the absence of Rowland's own father, it fell to Mathew Knowles to provide paternal guidance as Kelly adjusted to her new life. When I ask if she has any contact with her biological father, she stares into her hot chocolate, letting a sugar cube slowly dissolve by dipping her teaspoon in and out of the cup. Without looking up she says, 'No. I haven't seen him since I was seven, and he hasn't tried to get in touch with me. It's not something that I'm really sad about because I think that God fills voids in your life, and He did that with Mathew.'

Knowles had another void to fill in 2000 when Luckett and Roberson, who had been with the band since the beginning, filed a suit against him, accusing him of 'greed, insistence on control, self-dealing and promotion of his daughter's interests at their expense'. They claimed that after they sought a new manager, Knowles had fired them, and they had only found out when they saw the video for the 2000 single 'Say My

Name', with two other girls lip-synching the vocals they had recorded (Knowles has always argued with this sequence of events). Kelly, rather than be tempted into counter-accusations, sought spiritual guidance from the pastor at St John's. Beyoncé was so upset she didn't get out of bed for weeks. The case was settled out of court in July that year with

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Knowles replacing the two with Michelle Williams and Farrah Franklin. Franklin, however, didn't share the band's ferocious work ethic and left after five months; 'Farrah loved to be glammed up but she didn't like the 12 hours in the studio.'

In 2001, Destiny's Child, now down to three members, released their third album, *Survivor*, to the biggest

opening sales of a female group in Columbia Records' history. (Despite the anodyne press statements at the time of the split wishing the former members 'the best of luck with their careers', – the 'survivors' obviously felt their triumph in the face of adversity afforded them a sneaky gloat in the lyrics of the title song: 'You thought I'd be stressed without you but I'm chillin';/ Thought I wouldn't sell without you,/ sold nine million'.) *Survivor* also included 'Independent Women Part 1', from the soundtrack to *Charlie's Angels* (2000). With lines such as 'Try to control me, boy, you'll get dismissed./ Do what I want, live how I wanna live./ Buy my own diamonds and pay my own bills,' it became a girl-power anthem to rival Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive' on dancefloors across the world. ►



Destiny's Child: from left, Michelle Williams, Farrah Franklin (who has since left the group), Kelly Rowland and Beyoncé Knowles, 2000

Why does Rowland think they have reached this level of popularity over the hundreds of other female groups who might work as hard? She lets out a snort, and slaps her thigh as she shouts in her best Texas drawl, 'I don't knowwww! We've got hunger and talent. We still want more. I *still* want more. There are even more records to sell. Even more records to sell as a group, even more records to sell individually.'

Being that driven must be exhausting. Does Rowland ever wish for quieter life? 'Sometimes you feel like that, but you've got to think how many fans are excited about seeing you. It is a big responsibility because you are never "off" – your job is 24 hours a day, it doesn't matter if you meet a fan at the airport, if you're trying to eat dinner with your family at home. And it is crazy because so many people don't understand that you have to have a personal life.' Rowland feels her 'responsibility' keenly – responsibility to fans, to God, to the music industry, to Mathew Knowles. It is as though having worked this hard to become so successful, Rowland feels it would wrong to stop now. She says she tries to reply to fans whenever she has time, and mentions a young girl who wrote saying she had been abused by her stepfather. Rowland replied, offering advice and listing telephone numbers of various helplines. A similar sense of responsibility informs 'Stole', Rowland's second single from her album and a soulful ballad about the deaths of two teenagers – a bookish misfit who is bullied and commits suicide and a promising basketball player who is killed in gang violence. 'As a kid it's

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Kelly Rowland with Mathew Knowles, manager of Destiny's Child and father of Beyoncé, earlier this year

really hard, so many pressures and the weight of the world that you don't know who to talk to. So if they feel like they can associate with a celebrity, tell them things, then that's wonderful. When I have kids, I'm gonna build up their strength because that didn't happen to me. My mom loved me, but it didn't happen for me.'

Even so, it obviously hasn't held her back; as well as her new single, Rowland has roles in *Freddy vs Jason*,

a 'face-off' between two famous horror film baddies, Freddy Krueger and Jason of the *Halloween* films, which is released in America later this year, and *The Seat Filler* (Mel B of the Spice Girls plays her assistant, and the two have become good friends – 'She's ma homegirl!' Rowland says, placing her fist over her heart).

If in ten years' time Rowland is still as famous as she is now, doesn't she think it will be hard to remain as responsible, to resist the temptation to order a thousand flamingos to decorate her dressing-room or whatever it is that very famous singers do? 'I know that there is no room for that. There's no room for an ego because then I wouldn't be the same person, and I wouldn't have the same kind of success. I wouldn't be Kelly who started out hungry; I would be Kelly who likes to see her face everywhere, who thinks she did it all by herself. When she didn't.'

And just when she is beginning to sound a little too grown-up, she pauses, smirks and says, 'And if I did ever get an ego, my mom would give me one helluva whuppin'!' ●

'Train on a Track' is out now

Wire image