

Kelis Rogers does great hip-hop soul; she doesn't do small talk. As the outspoken singer prepares to release her third album, Kate Salter meets her in London

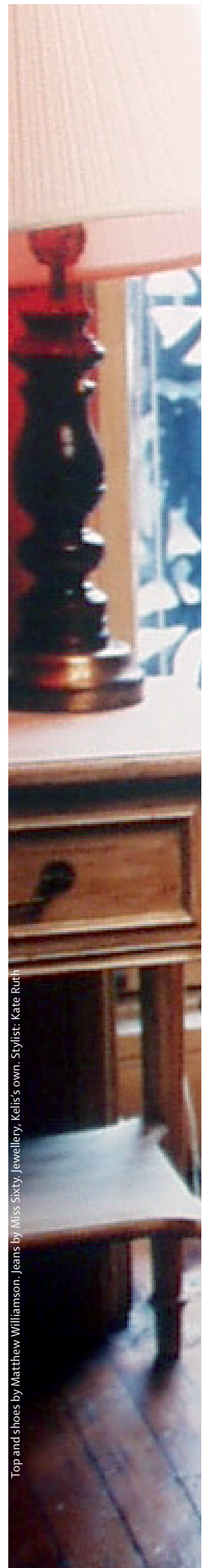
Special

For someone who made such a vociferous start to her career nearly four years ago, Kelis Rogers isn't saying much. The 24-year-old singer – known for her multicoloured afro, her numerous tattoos (including the one I can see now circling her wrist which reads GOD'S MUSICAL MESSENGER in Latin), her rumoured penchant for dying her pubic hair to match her eyebrows (green), and her first single, which consisted of a bloodcurdling yell of, 'I hate you so much right now... arrhhhhh', belted out at the top of her lungs – is strangely quiet today. Her husky voice creeps out of her in such a low, slow drawl that she sounds like she is about to fall asleep. The big hair is gone, too, and in its place is a sleek, poker-straight chestnut bob. Seeing her without her trademark afro is a surprise, I tell her. 'Yeah, what about it?' she growls back.

Kelis, it must be noted is as famous for her 'attitude' as she is for her hair. We are sitting in a mahogany meeting-room at Virgin Records headquarters in west London. The wooden blinds are pulled down and the room is dark and warm. Kelis sits opposite me with her legs stretched out lazily. She is tired, grumpy and more than a little suspicious. She has said before that she doesn't enjoy interviews and that, 'to be honest, I hate journalists'. She is one of the few people in her position who will say exactly what she thinks. She calls promotion work for her new album 'utterly unexciting', but admits that, 'It's Catch 22 – if you don't do this shit, then no one ever knows that you've made a new album.'

Kelis had her first hit when she was 19, with

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK GILES



Top and shoes by Matthew Williamson, jeans by Miss Sixty, Jewellery, Kelis's own. Stylist: Kate Ruth



Kelis, photographed in the Chelsea Hotel, New York, last month

the rapper Ol’ Dirty Bastard, and shortly afterwards released her first solo single, ‘Caught Out There’, which became known as the ‘I hate you so much right now’ song and reached number four in the charts (in the video, she hospitalised her two-timing boyfriend). Her first album, *Kaleidoscope*

toured with U2 (at Bono’s request, after he saw her perform live). Moby is a big fan, and Matthew Williamson, the fashion designer, calls her his ‘muse’ (she performed with him for the Fashion Rocks extravaganza at the Royal Albert Hall last month). She has worked with most of the influential rappers around,



‘Hip-hop is a small industry. Everyone knows each other, they’ve all slept with each other. Just like high school’

Kelis with her fiancé, the rapper Nasir ‘Nas’ Jones, in New York in February

(2000), had brilliant reviews. Critics agreed that they had heard nothing like it before and couldn’t decide whether it was soul, hip-hop, pop or rock. Kelis was hailed as the new Chaka Khan/Lauryn Hill/Macy Gray and won a Brit award for Best International Newcomer. Since then she has released a second album, *Wanderland* (2001) and

always giving their macho posturing a softer, sexier edge with her syrupy, albeit lascivious, choruses, and she recently helped P Diddy out on his ‘house’ album (he also happened to be her manager for a while).

Her third album, *Tasty*, is released next month, and it’s her best yet. ‘My life has gone pretty much according to plan,’ she says,

nodding. ‘There have been some glitches here and there, but the overall view has been pretty on target.’

In fact, the first few questions about the new album are met with one-word answers, but her mood brightens when we start talking about clothes instead. She is passionate about shopping and is planning a trip to TopShop and Portobello Road later today. Her adventurous sense of fashion – thigh-high pink boots, crocodile skin and real fur, outlandish 1970s-style sunglasses – has been toned down, and she sits before me wearing jeans, expensive-looking trainers and a brown jumper with a blue mohair trim on shoulders and cuffs. ‘I’m a moody dresser, so if I’m like, “I feel like a brown sweater today,” and I don’t have one, I’m *really* irritated. My whole day is thrown off.’ To emphasise her point she brings her little brown palm down heavily on her thigh. All in all, it’s probably a good thing she did find her brown jumper this morning.

Ever since its release, Kelis has been trying to make people see past ‘Caught Out There’ and the image of the homicidal man-hater in the video. She says she got fed up with journalists not getting the joke, asking the ‘same shit over and over again’ about why she was so angry (comments like, ‘everyone wants

to kick a guy’s ass and land ’em in the hospital once in a while’ didn’t help) and her irritation at being pigeonholed only exacerbated her reputation for being difficult.

She is certainly intense. When making a point she will lean right forward in her chair and stare at you for longer than is comfortable. She does this when she explains why she doesn’t like interviews. ‘You don’t get along with everyone you meet. That’s obvious. And in general most people don’t have to sit and have long conversations about their lives with people they don’t know. It’s not normal. Sometimes you’ll meet people that are interesting and make it OK for you to talk about yourself but some people’s personalities are so *dry* you feel like, “How the f— am I supposed to open up and tell you anything?”’

She says she has always been outspoken. ‘My Mom taught us to say whatever it was that we felt so I’ve always been like that. My Mom is a very opinionated person. And then she wonders why I’m the way I am!’

Kelis grew up in Harlem with her parents and three sisters (she has two elder sisters; one is a criminal psychologist, the other a psychiatrist; her younger sister is training to be a veterinarian). Her father, Kenneth Rogers, was a jazz saxophonist who took Kelis with

him when he travelled America, introducing her to Dizzy Gillespie and Nancy Wilson. Kelis’s mother, Iveliss, worked as a children’s clothes designer (Kelis’s name is a mix of Kenneth and Iveliss) and used to send Kelis to school in her own creations, for which she was teased mercilessly. When Kelis was 12 her father became a Pentecostal minister. She says she found it hard to get along with her ‘very strict’ parents, and she left home at 16. ‘I would have moved out at four if I could have. I was ready to go.’

She won a place at LaGuardia High School for Music and Art and Performing Arts in New York – the inspiration for *Fame* – and formed her first band, BLU (Black Ladies United). When she was 17 she met the producing duo The Neptunes, who secured her a record deal with Virgin and who produced her first two albums. She inspects her gold-painted nails then looks up and says, ‘I always had a really clear picture of who I was and where I was going to be at what point in my life.’

Last year she got engaged to the New York rapper Nas. Their combined fame means that, in America, they are the Posh and Becks of the rap world, but Kelis says she spends as little time as possible hobnobbing with the hip-hop crowd. ‘It’s like high school. It’s such a small

industry. Everyone knows each other, they’ve all slept with each other. Just like high school. Just a little more flashy. I didn’t like high school so I don’t like this shit.’ She says she and Nas don’t go out much, preferring to spend their time at their house in rural Georgia, going for bike rides, walks and – a curious image for a hardcore rapper like Nas – padding down to the local shop in their slippers.

Kelis seems to be slightly apprehensive of the idea of being shot back into the limelight again. After the the success of her first album people would come up to her on the street, stroke her hair, even smell her – ‘and they don’t realise why that’s a weird thing to do!’ she says, hooting with laughter. ‘And I really don’t understand the concept of autographs. I mean, they’re not worth anything ’till I die. Morbid but true.’

She pulls another chair towards her, and rests her legs on the arms so she is lying almost horizontally. ‘Look, everyone has a job where parts of it are not fun. I appreciate the fact that they care enough to bother me. But maybe I’m just having a bad day. Maybe my underwear is too tight! It’s just not human to be nice all the time.’ ●

Tasty (Virgin) is released on 8 December
