

If you liked Kelis' milkshake, try her sauce

The sassy dancefloor diva is back. And now she's a fully trained Cordon Bleu chef. Kelis talks about her foody new tunes — and why the music industry thinks she's a bitch

BY HATTIE COLLINS
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It's late and we're in a club in the hipster hamlet that is Manhattan's Lower East Side. Kelis has been given her own roped-off area, standard issue for pop stars, but she's ignoring it, mingling instead with the asymmetrical haircuts weaving to house music. A few hours ago, Kelis co-headlined a show, at New York's Webster Hall, with Swedish singer Robyn; tomorrow, she has to get herself and her 13-month-old son, Knight, ready for a flight to Europe, where she's touring her latest album, the critically acclaimed *Flesh Tone*.

"With this record," shouts Kelis above the din, before downing a shot of indeterminate ingredients, "it feels like I've been partying for a living."

Harlem-born Kelis returned to music earlier this year with her first studio recording since 2006's *Kelis Was Here*, in which she seemed to have a go at everything from sentimental pop to harder-edged R 'n' B. During the four years in between, she took a one-year Cordon Bleu course, training as a saucier, became pregnant with Knight, and divorced her husband, the rapper Nas. Initially, she says, returning to the spotlight wasn't something she relished. "It's mortifying," says the singer, who majored in drama at LaGuardia High (aka the Fame school). "I found out late in my career that I didn't want to be famous. I started at 17 and I wanted to be on Broadway. This is just what happened first. I had no idea that, 11 years later, I'd be talking about a decade-long career. I was 17 and now I'm 31. How did I get myself into this?" She guffaws loudly.

Regardless of intention, Kelis has had a consistently creative (if not always cash-till ringing) career. Her early work with hit-making songwriters and producers the Neptunes, with their genre-bending R 'n' B and peculiar blend of alt-pop, preceded the Gagas and Rihannas of this world by years; she hasn't much to say about either, citing La Roux and RoxySopp as more interesting propositions. "Everyone is trying so hard to be different that it's contrived and unnatural. I find it hard to appreciate."

You might consider Kelis — who, as we talk, is wearing a bright blue sequined catsuit, purple Cleopatra disco wig, six-inch heels and neon fingernails — a fine one to talk. In fairness, her outlandish fashion statements, which have included diamond-studded gold teeth, stretch back to the start of her career. "Everyone's attention span is getting shorter," she says. "As a result, everything — films, music, art — gets watered down and dumber. Every now and again, you get something great, but not often."

Amazonian in stature and strikingly attractive, Kelis Rogers is an intimidating figure; people's first impressions, she says, are generally that she's "a bitch and unapproachable." But she turns out to be fantastically good company: witty, engaging and much more interested in talking about current affairs, food and motherhood than trotting out self-serving platitudes. She liked *Inception*, loves *True Blood* and reveres "basically everything" by the African American sci-fi writer Octavia E. Butler; but she loathed *Salt*, which starred Angelina Jolie as a KGB sleeper agent. "Did you see it?" she asks. "I thought it was horrendous. My intelligence was insulted." She laughs. "But that's the thing with Angelina Jolie. I get sucked in every time, but I think she's overrated."

Despite her reticence at self-promotion,

Kelis has received a Brit (best international newcomer in 2001), two Grammy nominations, and has notched up a string of top 10 hits (the infectiously frothy *Milkshake* was her biggest in the UK, reaching No. 2 in 2004). Yet, for all this, she can be disarmingly frank about her talents: "There's a difference between a pop star and an artist. Pop stars have to be perfect all the time; an artist is allowed, on occasion, to suck. And I put myself in that category because I sometimes suck." She shrugs. "I'm not trying to please the masses. It's not going to happen, so I don't try."

So why do people's perceptions of her tend to polarize, why is she thought of as either shallow or scary? "I don't think people know me at all. At the end of the day, if you see me in sequins and glitter out at a club, you might think that's all there is. But, you know, it's just glitter. My friends who I've known since I was 17 — they know who I am."

She shrugs again, saying her reputation is probably due to her first single, 2000's rabble-rousing *Caught Out There (I Hate You So Much Right Now)*. "I think it set the tone for my entire life," she says of the song, with its decibel-piercing screams and savage refrains (So sick of your games/I'll set your truck to flames). "Also, within the industry, I've got a reputation because I really don't care enough. They take that aloofness as bitchiness. The music industry is a world of smoke and mirrors: They tell you exactly what they think you want to hear. And they are barefaced lying. I tend to stay away from that. When a man is assertive and clear, he's a leader and we should all follow him. When a woman has the same traits, she's a bitch."

On tour, Kelis has talked at length about gender politics and feminism with Robyn. "She was comparing how people are treated in the States to Sweden. For me, as an American black woman, feminism has a negative connotation here. I love being a woman. To me, everything that we embody is beautiful and powerful." Would she define herself as a feminist? "I don't know. I love being a woman, I love life, I love women. I think we're spectacular creatures. I think the word feminism is almost an oxymoron."

She frowns, then elaborates. "When people think of a feminist, they think of some hardened, scary woman; but, at the end of the day, what makes me strong is the fact that I'm very female. I don't think it makes me strong to be more like a male, or to be less of a female — that's friggin' ridiculous. To me, being a feminist is my sensuality: It's childbearing, breastfeeding, sexy clothes and great shoes. People have a warped perspective on it, thinking that to be a feminist you have to be less female, less sexual, less beautiful. I think that's totally backwards."

She also has little patience for anyone offering sympathy now that she's a single mum. "Yeah, it's hard being a working single mother, but on the flipside, it's awesome, too. You only have to worry about yourself. It's only your influence and your ideas. That's not to say there's not room for someone else to be involved, but at the moment I'm raising Knight how I think he should be raised. He's a great baby."

Her divorce from Nas has been acrimonious; the two are still working out custody and alimony. Her son was a key influence on *Flesh Tone*, a fancier album that Kelis began recording while she was pregnant. She wasn't signed at the time and found it thrilling to make a record "just for myself that I would enjoy and maybe some friends would play."

The album is steeped in her love of food and cooking — right down to its title, it seems. "This record is very basic and animalistic. It's carnal. If you see meat and it's red, you know it's healthy and it's vital. These are the things I was thinking about while making the record — great dinners out, the wine you ordered, the shoes you wore, the company you kept."

Flesh Tone has been another hit with critics, and has given Kelis a new audience. It has a celebratory sound with well-observed lyrics that lend gravitas to what could otherwise be just another dance record, while tracks like the first single *Acapella* and the forthcoming one, *Scream*, have been huge at festivals and clubs.

"I think I brought an honesty to music," Kelis says over her final drink before heading home. "There are prettier chicks, better dancers, and lots of people out there could probably sing better than me. I'm just the only me there is. And that's what makes it worth something. I don't think I'm the best at anything. It's just there's no one else like me — and somehow it works."

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