



KEYSHIA COLE

Keyshia Cole is the real deal. Like many young people raised in a tough neighborhood, the 21-year-old songstress endured a tumultuous childhood in Oakland, California, and has fought all her life to keep her dream of a music career alive. Now she's realizing that dream on her own terms with her first album for the A&M label, *The Way It Is*. It's been a long road for Keyshia, but it's her powerful voice-- a bell-like instrument whose soaring clarity is topped off with a tantalizing touch of soulful grit -- that's carried her through, not to mention the diminutive singer's personal combination of sugar, spice, sass and sex appeal, along with a solid-steel spine.

"Being young, you have to be really dedicated to doing it for yourself," says Keyshia, who co-wrote most of the songs on her new CD and cites artists like Mary J. Blige and Brandy as inspirations. "There's a lot of trials and tribulations you have to go through to get what you want, especially if you feel like it belongs to you."

Keyshia's talent, personality, and faith have won her fans and supporters within the notoriously picky entertainment industry since she was a young girl. While still a pre-teen she convinced then-superstar MC Hammer that he should put her on, and she even got a chance to do some recording with the rap star before she was 12 years old. She also scored sessions singing hooks with other Bay Area artists, including Messy Marv's "Nubian Queen" remix, which was a regional hit for the rapper, and with Tony Tone's Dwayne Wiggins, who featured her on his soundtrack for the indie film *Me & Mrs. Jones*.

Within minutes of catching her boyfriend cheating, Keyshia was in her car driving to Los Angeles in the middle of the night to start a brand-new life. It only took the determined singer a few months of making connections to snag an introduction to A&M Records President Ron Fair, who immediately signed her to her first solo recording deal. For her first album, Keyshia has garnered the support of none other than reigning hip-hop star Kanye West; producer and songwriter DaRon of R&B group 112; rapper Chink Santana, whose gruff stylings have graced hits by Ashanti and The Inc.; and popular producer E-Poppi. She also got a chance this past Spring to collaborate with Eve for her debut single, "Never," on the *Barbershop 2* soundtrack.

So what's everybody raving about? Check Keyshia's first single with West, "I Changed My Mind." The tune is a perfect fit for Keyshia's longing soprano and her distinct stance as a performer: Like many young women, she's looking for love, but she's not so desirous of romance that she'll sacrifice her own needs. Having been devoted to her man, she quickly realized that he is devoted to himself. What's a girl to do? She simply changes her mind about being involved and walks away.

Keyshia easily admits that the song reflects her romantic philosophy. "That song was actually about being focused and dedicated to what you want and what you're trying to be. It's about the things you're trying to accomplish in life and dealing with somebody, a significant other, who comes in between that, especially with their ways. I want to be an example for young girls in following your goals and dreams and making it happen and checking him out later if you have to."

A twist on that philosophy is on display in "I Should've Cheated," which was crafted by Daron, a producer whose songs Keyshia admired so much she chased him down in Atlanta to work with him. On the track, Keyshia sings of being a devoted girlfriend who is constantly accused of cheating by her man. It seems that two can play that game, and Keyshia has no trouble letting Mr. Suspicious know what's up. "That song has a lot of emotion, because I feel every girl and every guy can relate to that," she says. "If somebody is doing you wrong or saying that you're doing something and you're being the best that you can be in the relationship, then you get home and they're like 'Where you been?' 'Well, where I *could* have been is ...' Don't start! It could get real ugly."

At the same time, Keyshia's songcraft reveals that the plucky artist isn't afraid to let a man know she's interested. On the flowing "We Could Be," she fearlessly lays out all a former friendship could blossom into. On the mid-tempo "Down N Dirty," she has no trouble expressing what she'd like to do. And Chink Santana lends his gritty rhyming skills to "Situations," another love song with a twist.

On the feel-good, old-school-styled ballad "Love," Keyshia's powerful vocal intensifies a straight-ahead plea to the object of her affection, who's involved with someone else. It was a real-life situation that compelled Keyshia, who admits ballads are not her favorite style, to come up with the lyrics to "Love" in five minutes flat. At a Malibu restaurant, she spied the same guy who years earlier had told her he wasn't interested in a committed relationship with her dining with his girlfriend. "So I was looking at the girl and I was like, 'What is it about her? You know, like seriously, what are you thinking?'" Keyshia remembers. "And I just wrote about it, it came out really quick." She immediately headed into the studio with producer Greg Curtis: "After I wrote the song, I went to the studio about 4 in the morning, and by 5 or 6 I was done with the song and that's what you hear."

Ms. Cole even applies her keep-it-real aesthetic to the tune "You've Changed," in which she takes on none other than Jay-Z for the lyrics to his tune "Song Cry." The tune is from the point of view of a neglected wife who's had enough.

A self-described "hard worker" who can sometimes be "goofy" and "fun" yet says she would never kiss a guy she doesn't know for a video, Keyshia is passionate about providing inspiration to young girls, and young people in general, who come from troubled backgrounds. "I want to be an example for young people, especially growing up in the 'hood, because it's already hard enough to not be focused, not to be trying, to be doing something," she says, adding that hope and faith and holding on to a dream can carry anyone far. The tattoo on her right shoulder -- a cross, a heart, and a star-- truly reflects her belief that goals can be realized, despite the circumstances. "It's really possible," she says with a grin. And those are her thoughts -- just the way it is.

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