

Keyshia wears a Dsquared2 jacket and (from left) rings by Roberto Coin, Movado, Georg Jensen by Jacqueline Rabun and De Beers.

A SOUL SURVIVOR

With a voice like raw honey, R&B singer Keyshia Cole taps the pain of her past to script songs that are beautiful, honest and unflinching. JEANNINE AMBER gives us a close-up of the girl who says she's *Just Like You*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG BROOM STYLING BY AGNES CAMMOCK

Keyshia

Keyshia Cole is sitting in the corner of a dark restaurant in New York City on a summer night. She's simply dressed in jeans, flip-flops and a cream-colored blouse; if it weren't for the makeup left on from a BET taping earlier that day, she would seem much younger than her 26 years. Vacillating between certainty and ambivalence, the platinum-selling artist is speaking about breaking off her engagement to a man she was with for a year and a half. The engagement came complete with a diamond ring and a 10-year-old would-be stepchild, her fiancé's son. "It was me, him and the baby," Cole says, picking at her dinner. "It's been hard because I really miss that child."

The breakup confounds her. She brings it up over the phone one day and then again during dinner a week later. "I just couldn't do it," she says. "It's weird. After this guy proposed to me, I was like, dang, this is everything a woman lives for: to be married, with a ring, to be able to represent something. But for me, it was the opposite. I was scared. When you get married, you become one; you don't live just for yourself anymore. I'm just not ready for that. I'm not done with my goals in life. What's the word when you just kind of fall back and let your man do the man thing? *Submit?* I'm all jacked up on that word. I just couldn't submit. But I loved him. That's the crazy thing about it."

She won't share the name of her ex (although she's widely rumored to have been linked with Atlanta-based rapper Young Jeezy). But his identity is hardly the point. Cole's hesitation about love, the very emotion she soared to chart-topping popularity singing about, reveals a fundamental question about the artist: Can a

woman who has seen the worst life has to offer ever truly believe in everlasting love?

HOUSE OF PAIN

As with most spine-tingling soul singers, from Billie to Etta to Tina to Mary, life for Cole didn't begin easily. The Oakland-born daughter of a former drug addict and a prostitute, Cole was one of seven siblings, some of whom she's never met. With her mother unable to care for her, Cole was placed in foster care at age 2, with a family who would later adopt her. For years, Cole says, no one told her she was adopted. Then at about age 7 she found a government check made out in her name, with her mother listed as the payee. "I asked her about it, and she said it was none of my business," recalls Cole. "So I investigated and I found all these old check stubs. When I asked her why she was getting money for me, that's when she told me the truth."

Cole remembers a childhood punctuated with traumatic visits from her biological mother. "She would come to the house, and my foster mother would tell her to get away," Cole says. "Then they'd both be yelling, 'That's my baby! That's my baby!' It was real hectic. I just remember my mother always leaving."

For years Cole didn't know anything about her biological father, but recently a man approached her manager after a show asking for a blood test, claiming to have been with her mother back in the day. But Cole's mother, who has kicked her 20-year crack addiction and now lives with her famous daughter, insists the man couldn't be her dad. "My mother was like, 'I was very out in the world at the time, but I know who your father is, and it's Sal,'" says Cole. "He's dead now, but I saw a picture of him and he's this short, fat full-Italian man. When I saw the picture, I said, 'Ma, this is not my father! Get outta here.'" ▸

While her biological mother dipped in and out of her life, one constant female presence was her older sister Neffeteria, 27, whose own chaotic life played out in season one of Cole's reality show *The Way It Is*, which returns for its second season this month on BET. While Cole grew up in foster care, Neffeteria was raised by their grandmother, whom Cole would often visit. As a child, Neffeteria and another young relative were brutally raped after two men broke into their home. Cole believes that her cousin Andre, who was 9 at the time, was forced to watch. At 19, Andre put a bullet in his head.

"It did something to all of them," Cole says. "The other girl, she just went crazy." And Neffeteria's confidence level plummeted, recalls Cole. Suddenly her then 10-year-old sister was acting grown, parading her body like a teenager. "I hated it because my sister was just *gone*," says Cole now. "After that it was a wrap."

To this day, Cole worries about how the rape has affected her sister. Last January she invited Neffeteria and her three young children to come live with her. But it hasn't been easy. "Neffe and I, we don't always get along," she says of their relationship. "Sometimes I think maybe I'm being mean for not understanding. Maybe she just needs someone to hug her. She's been through a lot."

ALL EYES ON KEYSHIA

With a family history this fraught with troubles, one could easily imagine Cole going down her own dark path. Mention the possibility and Cole stiffens her back. "I'd *die* before that," she balks. "When she was on drugs, my mother used to say to me, 'You're gonna end up just like me.' But no, sorry, I'm not. I've always kept my dignity, my morals and my perspective because God always had my back. Even though it very well could have been that type of situation for me, I was raised in the church. My foster mother was pastor, and I know God very well. He's like my father, and He just made sure I was always okay."

Cole was 6 when she started singing over at her best friend's house, the two of them trying to outdo her adopted brother, an aspiring rapper. When she was 12, her brother introduced her to fellow Oakland native MC Hammer. Determined to parlay the meeting into an opportunity, Cole called the studio daily, leaving messages with the secretary. Finally her brother took her into the studio with him, and she ended up singing on Hammer's never-released track "I'm Just a Kid."

Two years later, when Hammer was signed to Suge Knight's Death Row record label, he bought the then 14-year-old Cole a plane ticket to Los Angeles, where she ended up performing at Knight's annual Mother's Day Party. "When I first heard her, I knew she was going to be a star," says Knight. "It's not often that someone comes along who doesn't need to be coached to sing. They just express themselves through their music. Mary was like that, and so is Keyshia."

For two years, on and off, Cole spent time hanging out in the studio with Death Row artists like Snoop Dogg and the Outlawz. Tupac Shakur took a special interest in the petite and boisterous Cole, treating her like a little sister. Cole remembers his pulling her aside the day he died: "He was like, 'You are really beautiful, baby, and it's

not your fault. But guys are gonna want to have sex with you. You gotta watch them.' I'm like, 'You gotta be kidding me.' I was only a kid. I hadn't even started my menstruation. I told him I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. He said I'd figure it out one day."

Years later, when a record executive whom Cole had come to regard as a father figure leaned forward and tried to kiss her when the two were alone together, Tupac's words rang in her ears. "I haven't told anybody about that," she says quietly. She refuses to reveal the exec's name, "because even after he did that, I still had respect for everything he had done for me. It's just that he really, really hurt me and made me change my views on men. You think someone loves you for one reason and then they..." Her voice trails off. "I just don't get it."

Cole says after she rebuffed his advances, the executive suddenly stopped helping her career. "Everyone was saying to me, 'That was your shot! You only get one chance in life and that was it,'" she says. "I remember praying to God that this couldn't have been my shot because it seemed so wrong."

After Tupac's death and Knight's subsequent incarceration on



Keyshia sports a Jean Paul Gaultier dress, OGI Ltd. bangles, Georg Jensen by Lina Falckesgaard bangle, and (from left) rings by Pasha de Cartier, Movado, Lorraine Schwartz, VBH and Roberto Coin. For details, see *Where to Buy*.

Soon after, an early version of "Love" made its way into the hands of Ron Fair, chairman of Geffen Records. "I listened to the track and immediately felt her oppression and hopefulness and sadness," says Fair. "Keyshia had a tear in her voice and an authenticity that really spoke to me. It made me feel we could change the world." He offered her a deal on the spot.

THE BEST IS YET TO COME

Watch Cole onstage and it's easy to see the swagger and heartbreak of a young Mary J. But the similarities can be misleading. Blige entered the music scene scarred and adrift. By her own admission, she clung to drugs and men, looking for solace. But Cole is the opposite. Her troubled past has manifested in a fierce and self-protective independence. In the second episode of *The Way It Is*, Ron Fair is seen repeatedly trying to offer Cole help in wrangling artists for her new album *Just Like You*, which drops September 25. Cole turns down his offer with a cool "I'll be all right." She wears this insistence like armor. Her independence may be her greatest strength, but it also shields her from anyone who tries to get too close. Especially men. "Sometimes other people feel like they know what's best for you," says Cole. "But I know where I want to be. I see my future, and I'd rather go ahead and knock that out myself. I can't risk creating misfortune or unhappiness right now. I work so hard to represent myself well; for me to let anyone else drive my vehicle beside God, it's like, no. I'm not even looking for anybody. I don't want anybody. I just can't."

In the first leg of promoting *Just Like You*, the singer sits on the red sofa of BET's *106 and Park*, fielding questions about her life. At one point there's an undercurrent of discomfort as the hosts allude to her engagement, which Cole deflects. "Don't even start," she says with a laugh. But then she suddenly turns serious. "As young women, I think we need to realize that a relationship is really a commitment," she says to explain why she's still single. "In this business, you need to pay attention and do what you have to do."

Later, as she exits the building, she's mobbed by teenagers wielding picture-taking cell phones. She poses for a while, smiling graciously, then hops into an SUV. "Was that okay?" she leans forward to ask her bodyguard. "Was it okay that I said that on TV?" she asks again. Because for all her emotive talent, for all the raw pain, longing, bitterness and joy she captures in song, it seems Keyshia Cole still isn't sure just what to say about that thing called love. □

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"I've always kept my dignity, my morals and my perspective because God always had my back."

MAKEUP: AJ CRIMSON/EPHANY ARTISTS; HAIR: NELSON VERCHERDE/FACTO; MANICURIST: HONEYDE FACTO

parole-violation charges, Cole ended up back in Oakland, struggling again. She worked at a coffee shop and a hair salon, but short of cash, she ended up living with an ex-boyfriend and his mother. The situation was less than ideal. One night her ex came home flaunting his new girl. An argument erupted and Cole decided she'd had enough. She filled up her car with gas, drove back to Los Angeles, and made her way back into the studio to work on a demo.