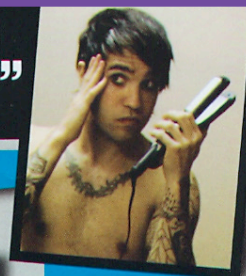


ON THE
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FALL OUT BOY "I'M PRETTY MUCH
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through it once again. This time, everyone whoops even louder.

After 90 minutes of hearing the Beatles alternately honored and defaced, Nigel Lythgoe figures that the tribute is about as good as it's ever going to get, and sends the *Idol* grads home for the evening. Clarkson is far too polite and low-maintenance to have caused any fuss while the rehearsals dragged on, but she has little time to waste these days. Her new album, *My December*, written nearly exclusively by Clarkson to the consternation of her record company, has finally been granted a release date, after a hostile and unusually public battle between her celebrated record-company boss, Clive Davis, and her high-profile manager, Jeff Kwatinetz—and several

months of prerelease promotion are being squeezed into one. Clarkson, though, is a confirmed chatterbox—"I moved so many times growing up, I got good at talking to anyone"—and before leaving, she stops to gab with Underwood ("She looks like Miss Oklahoma," Kelly says without rancor). Hugs exchanged, she finally heads down to the dressing-room area. Five years ago, in this same concert hall, Clarkson sang the dickens out of the heroically sappy "A Moment Like This" and began her ascent from Burleson, Texas, cocktail waitress to Grammy winner. "When I was onstage just now, all these feelings were coming back," she says. "I remembered being onstage that night and saying to myself, 'I don't want to put out a CD right away, I want to make sure I love everything I do, I don't want to sell out. Now that people voted for me, I'm going to have this opportunity.' I kept thinking to myself, *Just don't blow it.*"

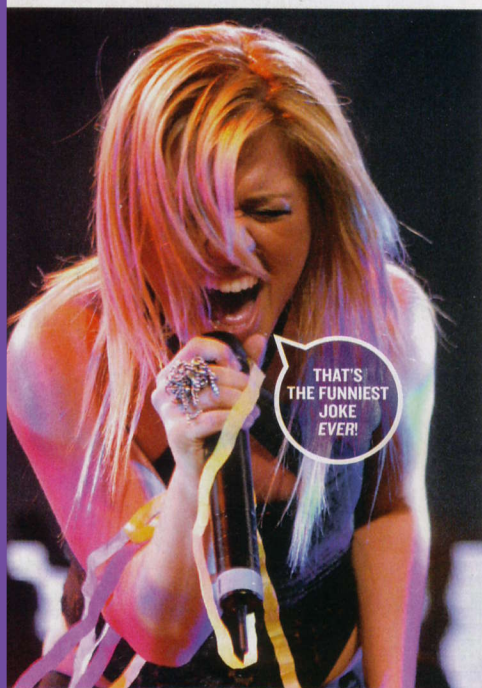
IN ESSENCE,

that's what music-industry insiders and fans alike are now wondering: Has Kelly Clarkson blown it? Has she taken the enormous goodwill and affection she earned through her *American Idol* triumph and

her two albums, *Thankful* and the smash hit *Breakaway*, and traded it all in to follow her muse? *My December* marks some important changes for Clarkson, ones that can be seen as either integral to her inalienable right to self-expression and creative control (Team Kelly), or as youthful vanity, overconfidence and perhaps even ingratitude (Team Clive).

Ever since *Idol*, Clarkson has, for the most part, been singing other people's songs, which, in the realm of pop music, is typically how business is done. Frank Sinatra sang other people's songs (Paul Anka wrote "My Way"). Elvis sang other people's songs. So did the stars of Motown. Barry Manilow didn't write "I Write the Songs." Whitney Houston made millions (and made Clive Davis millions) by singing songs written by professional songwriters. A Swede in his 30s wrote Britney's "... Baby One More Time." The list is endless, the formula successful: an assembly-line approach to making music that values the end product—the song—over all else.

When *American Idol* came along, most music-industry executives were openly dismissive about the program's prospects for launching memorable recording careers. They found it depressing, if not appalling—the antithesis of the rock tradition of artists writing and performing >>



ANALYZE THIS!

Kelly Clarkson's new album is brimming with bitterness and pain.

But what do her lyrics really say about her—and the kind of girlfriend she'll make in the future? We asked **DR. MICHELLE R. CALLAHAN**, relationship expert for *The Tyra Banks Show*, for her take



"HAUNTED"

LYRIC: *Louder, louder/The voices in my head/Whispers taunting/All the things you said/Faster the days go by and I'm still/Stuck in this moment of wanting you here.*

ANALYSIS: The "voices in my head" bit sounds alarming, but Clarkson's not unhinged—just dealing with loss like a normal person, according to our relationship expert. "Kelly's not like many celebrities, who, when they break up with someone, go to the club the very same day and act like they don't care," Dr. Michelle says. "She's willing to say, 'I'm so *not* over it.' She's a real, regular person. I do think an average guy might have a chance with her."

"NEVER AGAIN"

LYRIC: *I hope the ring you gave to her turns her finger green/I hope when you're in bed with her, you think of me/I would never wish bad things, but I don't wish you well.*

ANALYSIS: Despite her claim that she "would never wish bad things," Kelly sounds in a mighty vengeful mood here. Still, according to Dr. Michelle, it's not like the *Idol* alum is going to go Glenn Close, bunny-boiling mad. "Her ex has asked a different woman to marry him—that's about as deep as you can cut, so it's not unusual to be this angry," she says. "Years from now she may regret having exposed her feelings, but right now it's probably helping her."

"CAN I HAVE A KISS"

LYRIC: *I know why you left/I can't blame you myself/Must be hard living with ghosts and such an empty shell/I tried to warn you/I've been a mess since you've known me.*

ANALYSIS: Clarkson's got more baggage than LAX—and she knows it. Dr. Michelle advises that the singer get into therapy to work on her issues and wait six months to a year before reentering the dating world. "The next person she gets together with is going to have to be patient," she says. "If you're a guy who wants a really passionate, loving girlfriend, she sounds like the girl. But I wouldn't go for it now." *Mark Tarm*