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The Culture

Give Her the Crown Lily Allen is making the sharpest pop songs that radio won't play

By Sam Lansky

DURING A RECENT CONCERT AT NEW YORK CITY'S Highline Ballroom, Lily Allen paused her set to autograph a copy of her new album, *Sheezus*, for a fan standing close to the stage. "See?" she said into the microphone. "I'm such a nice pop star." She adopted a fake drawl. "I'll do anything for my fans."

It was a typically arch moment for Allen, 29, because she is not a nice pop star—she's a talented one and an exciting one, certainly, but not quite *nice*. At that performance, her first U.S. show in five years, her likably foulmouthed banter with the audience reflected a mix of anxiety ("I've been away for a while, so I was sh-tting myself about coming back"), self-deprecation ("Thank you to all 17 people who downloaded my album!") and frustration ("F-ck you, male misogynistic bloggers!" she yelled at one point). The last time Allen promoted an album, 2009's *It's Not Me, It's You*, she was 23 and a celebrity both in her native U.K. and in the U.S., where her witty, outspoken persona had made her famous. Since then, she has announced her retirement, gotten married (to Sam Cooper, a construction-firm owner) and had two children. Though she remains a tabloid fixture in the U.K., she has faded from the public eye Stateside. This comeback makes her nervous.

"I feel a little bit out of my comfort zone," she says over tea at the Mercer Hotel in downtown Manhattan. "If I was qualified to be a lawyer, I'd totally do that, and I'd be really good at it. But I left school when I was 15. I'm not qualified to do any other thing."

The daughter of British actor Keith Allen and film producer Alison Owen, Lily Allen was always rebellious, attending 13 different schools before dropping out to pursue a music career. In 2005, she rose to popularity on Myspace on the strength of her demos. Her style was original, mordantly drawn singer-songwriter pop inflected with ska and rocksteady influences. In 2006, her debut album, *Alright, Still*, spawned a string of singles—like

"Smile," a No. 1 hit in the U.K.—and was well received by critics, who welcomed an alternative to the urban pop that was dominating radio. Her sophomore effort, *It's Not Me, It's You*, was more straightforward, slick synth-pop produced by Greg Kurstin (who has also worked with Kelly Clarkson and Pink) but even more acerbic in its lyrics and controversial in its subject matter. One song, "Everyone's at It," discussed the ubiquity of drugs in culture ("I'm not trying to say that I'm smelling of roses/ But when will we tire of putting sh-t up our noses?" Allen sings sweetly). Another was about George W. Bush and was titled simply "F-ck You." It went to No. 1 on the club chart in the U.S.

When Allen returned to the studio after her long break, she resumed work with Kurstin and found that she had a lot of songwriting material. The resulting album, *Sheezus*, is even more biting than its predecessors. "Lily's style is to think out loud," says Kurstin, who produced 10 songs on *Sheezus*. "It's very personal, and it comes from her lyrically. As opposed to crafting a chorus and a verse, Lily has something to say, and she fits it into song format."

Pop and Prejudice

ALLEN'S TRENCHANT, SELF-DEPRECATING STYLE aligns her more with a stand-up act than pop songcraft. In *Sheezus*, her take on gender relations evokes breakout comedian Amy Schumer: she's eager to take down the patriarchy that's oppressing her but also curious about her complicity in it.

"I want to be the one that calls everyone out, but calling myself out as well," Allen says. "There's a lot of contradiction and hypocrisy on my record. There's one song that has me saying something completely opposite to what I'm saying in another song. Aren't we all like that, every day? I don't want to die, but I still smoke 20 cigarettes a day."

Many of the songs tackle frustration, on

Allen returns after a five-year hiatus, brasher and more outspoken than ever





Stagecraft Allen kicks off a 19-date North American tour in September

matters ranging from the petty (trendy DJ culture on “Insincerely Yours”) to the profound (casual misogyny on “Hard Out Here”). The title track serves as a statement of intent: a play on the Kanye West album *Yeezus*, it’s a slick bit of headline-grabbing legerdemain. On the chorus, Allen name-checks Rihanna, Beyoncé, Lorde, Lady Gaga and Katy Perry, comparing them with one another. “Give me that crown, bitch/ I wanna be Sheezus,” she sings.

Though she says the song is a testament to “the anxiety I feel about re-entering this scene,” it’s also about something slyer than that: the way female pop artists are always framed in comparison with their contemporaries. “Sheezus” takes the culture of pitting women against one another and makes it so explicit that it’s parodic.

The album’s lead single, “Hard Out Here,” takes a similar tack in its exploration of how women are handled in the media, and it’s a mouthful of social commentary. “Inequality promises that it’s here to stay,” goes one lyric. “There’s a glass ceiling to break/ There’s money to make,” goes another. It’s ground that’s been traveled before by pop divas less known for being opinionated (notably Pink on the 2006 single “Stupid Girls”), but Allen insists that it’s more observational than political.

“I never tried to make a political statement,” she says. “It’s not my responsibility

to solve all types of feminism. It’s a song, and I’m pissed off sometimes with people treating me differently because I’ve got a pair of tits. It’s as simple as that.”

The video for “Hard Out Here” lampoons the hypersexualized imagery of pop and hip-hop videos, particularly the one for Robin Thicke’s 2013 hit “Blurred Lines,” which features a parade of nude women. Allen’s take sparked a tide of controversy about both the clear feminist bent of the song as well as her use of women of color as backup dancers, inviting accusations of minstrelsy. (A similar criticism plagued Miley Cyrus after her controversial 2013 VMA performance.) Allen says the video is about gender, not race: “Everyone’s entitled to their own opinion. I just know that I don’t walk into a room and go, ‘How many black people are there? How many white people are there?’ I’m not counting.”

It’s easiest for Allen to see the discrimination that she herself faces as a woman in the public eye. She recounts a story about going to a premiere of *Game of Thrones* with her brother, the actor Alfie

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Allen, who plays Theon Greyjoy on the show; later, a tabloid site wrote that Allen must keep her nanny busy, working all day and partying all night. “Like, f-ck you!” she says, remembering the incident. “I put my kids to bed, had a shower and went out to see my brother’s show. How dare you? You’d never be like, ‘[Coldplay’s] Chris Martin is on tour, abandoning his children!’”

Still Hard Out There

THE “HARD OUT HERE” VIDEO HAS racked up over 27 million views to date on YouTube. But the market for a pop star making clever, difficult songs is narrow, and Allen’s commercial prospects, at least in the U.S., aren’t as promising as they were eight years ago. Without the mass-market distribution channel of radio behind her, it’s tougher to get the message across. If Allen had it her way, she says, “Hard Out Here” would have been released to radio. “I think I’m justified in saying it would have been a hit,” she says. “Radio stations don’t want to play any music that has a message. Everyone’s worried they’re going to get fired.”

Even though Allen uses top-notch producers—aside from Kurstin, the album makes use of hip-hop producer DJ Dahi (Drake, Kendrick Lamar) and Shellback (Taylor Swift, Britney Spears)—her sensibilities are too English and too caustic for superstardom like that of Beyoncé, who released her own feminist anthem with “***Flawless.” Allen’s an admirer, though. “I would go gay for her,” she says, laughing. “I would turn for Beyoncé. I think our kids would look really good together. It’d be like a Brad and Angelina situation. We should get together and adopt more.”

It’s easy to dismiss Allen as the perpetual trash talker, criticizing the popular girls even as she aspires to be one of them, and yet there’s real value in her social message and the wit with which she dispenses it. Allen may not be the most famous among her peers, but she’s one of the more important—a cultural critic embedded within pop music, saying the things that her contemporaries won’t.

“I change with the way the world changes,” Allen says. “My music is always social commentary. I don’t know what the world is going to be like in five years’ time, but as long as I’m not ashamed of what I’m putting out, then I’m happy.” ■