

# Pop's *Rolling Stone* Gangster *of* Love







How Dua Lipa went from  
an adolescence in Kosovo to  
a billion-stream hit

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PHOTOGRAPH BY BRYAN DERBALLA





Some dudes on *Saturday Night Live*'s crew are hammering together a green screen at Studio 8H when Dua Lipa walks past them in a long black dress, steps onto a stage, and seats herself atop a grand piano, dangling her legs from the end like a lounge act. It's the first Thursday in February, and two days from now, Lipa will take this stage as the evening's musical guest. She has reason to feel confident: A 22-year-old pop singer from London, Lipa was the most-streamed female musician in the U.K. last year; fans include Coldplay's Chris Martin and Bruno Mars; and her biggest single, "New Rules," has more than a billion YouTube views.

Lipa starts into "Homesick," a wounded ballad she wrote with Martin, which is far and away the sparest song in her catalog—a slow, spotlit showcase for her rich, smoky voice, whereas most of her songs tend toward brash, uptempo thumpers. Lipa's day-to-day manager, Jules, aims his phone at a monitor, shooting video of the rehearsal for reference, because Lipa's plan is to sit on the piano near-motionless for the entire song, and although she hopes this will register as subtly powerful, she also worries it might just come off as inert.

Lipa has learned that, when you're in the public eye, even the tiniest gestures can resonate. For instance: Last October, she borrowed a Taylor Swift *Speak Now* T-shirt from Jules and wore it to a soundcheck and meet-and-greet in Germany. Photos made it to Instagram, and Swift's fans spotted it and giddily circulated the shots. Soon Swift herself posted a euphoric comment online in response: "I AM SCREECHING WITH JOY." The next month, however, all her goodwill with Team Taylor went up in flames when some of those same Swift fans discovered a 2016 video interview in which Lipa, engaged in a cats-or-dogs-style quiz, was asked to choose between Swift and Kanye West—and went with Yeezy, emphatically and unhesitatingly. "I wasn't thinking about their beef," she says. "I was thinking about their music, and Taylor is amazing, but I'm such a hip-hop fan that

I would probably choose Kanye over anyone." The result was a barrage of hate from the Swift faithful. "They were sending me snake emojis for, like, three days straight. They're like, 'I hope you die.' I'm like, 'Yo! I literally didn't say anything.'"

Now, rehearsing at *SNL*, Lipa's worries about "Homesick" turn out to have merit. Legs crossed tight, back straight, she holds a cordless mic with her left hand and plants her right hand stiffly on the piano, not because it's what feels the most natural, necessarily, but because her vocal coach, Lorna, told her that this pose would help give her strength to catapult into the song's early, hard-to-hit high notes. The performance feels off, and, when it's over, Lipa grimaces: One particularly high note proved irksomely out of her reach.

Within seconds, she's in a huddle with her team. Jules presses play on the video he shot; Lorna launches into vocal drills. Lipa scrutinizes the phone and makes strange noises for Lorna, then the *SNL* camera crew is back in position and it's time for another go. This time, when the second verse starts, Lipa clutches the mic two-handed, holds it to her chest, then brings her left palm up beside her cheek, where, captured in close-up, it trembles and grabs, helping to put some more drama into the performance. It's a minuscule tweak, but Lipa could tell from Jules' video that it would make a big difference. (Come Saturday, she will repeat these motions almost exactly.)

Some three dozen crew members and assorted hangers-on watch, rapt. When she's done, the room breaks into applause. Looking effortless takes work.

**D**UA LIPA HASN'T performed for a room this small in a while. Last fall, she played two nights at Madison Square Garden while opening a bunch of arena shows for Bruno Mars. She has a sound suited to vast spaces: big beats, big hooks and even bigger vocals. She started posting YouTube covers from a friend's bedroom when she was 15, and even then she was unafraid to tackle full-throated material from heroes like Christina Aguilera and Joss Stone. These covers were part of a conscious strategy: "It was like a portfolio. I would go out to gigs and make friends, and if someone was like, 'I'm a producer' or 'I'm a songwriter,' I'd be like, 'Well, I have these covers...'"

A string of such encounters, in person and online, led her to Ben Mawson, a music manager whose client roster includes Lana

Del Rey. He signed her, and "literally the day after" booked her into the studio with what would become a parade of various writers. Lipa said she did have a rough notion of what she wanted to sound like, inspired by her twinned loves of pop and hip-hop, but its oddness would throw people for a loop: "I'd go into the studio, like, 'I want to sound like Nelly Furtado and J. Cole,' and people would be like, 'What the fuck?'"

Inspiration came from unlikely places. While co-writing with the London-based electronic act RITUAL, Lipa struggled to crack the code of an unfinished track: "I was going through a tough breakup. Someone who made me feel like I wasn't good enough. But when I wrote this song, I wanted it to seem like he couldn't get enough of me." The song "was good, but the chorus wasn't quite there. We were like, 'Let's scrap it.' And I was scrolling through Tumblr, and I see the words 'Hotter than Hell' in red on a black background. And I go, 'That's cool!' What if he thought I was hotter than hell, and I just didn't want him?" The single, "Hotter Than Hell," went gold in the U.K.

With that song, Lipa says she finally found a track that felt uniquely like her. It introduced her to fans as a sort of warrior of love: Moments of vulnerability and longing dot her lyrics, but her prevailing mode is to take no bullshit and take no prisoners.

"New Rules" is framed as a three-point battle plan for cutting off a bad-news dude; a more recent single, "IDGAF," plays almost like the sequel, where a former romantic tormentor crawls out of the woodwork, interested in rekindling things, and Lipa mercilessly sends him packing.

These songs aren't exactly autobiographical, but Lipa says she's got ample experience in the chump-boyfriend department. Sometimes her exes were "emotionally manipulative"; sometimes their failings were more comical. "I dated this guy who literally would never eat a single vegetable," she recalls. "I was like, 'This is terrible. You eat like a five-year-old. I'm fucking out.'"

A couple of weeks ago, Lipa was watching the Grammys, blown away by

Kendrick Lamar's performance. The event was criticized for the preposterous facts that Alessia Cara was the only woman to win an award during the entire show and that Lorde hadn't been offered a solo performance despite an Album of the Year nomination. Recording Academy president

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## Lip A Faith

Above: Lip A has been working on new music with Mark Ronson (left) and Diplo. Left: In Pristina, Kosovo, with her father, who used to play in a Kosovar rock band called Oda.

Music filled the Lipa household thanks to her father, who sang lead, on the side, in a Kosovar rock band called Oda. "They did it for fun," she says,

"but then they had a really big song called 'Beso ne Diell,' which means 'Believe in the sun.' I did a show in Kosovo two summers ago and me and my band decided to surprise my dad and sing it. It was so surreal, because everyone in the audience was singing along."

In her early adolescence, the Lipas moved back to Kosovo's capital, Pristina: "I could speak the language, but I couldn't read or write, so moving there was daunting — the other kids weren't going to be making spelling mistakes on their homework. Not only that, but just being the new girl in school, once everyone has formed their friendships. It was nerve-wracking." But she made friends, and they put her on to hip-hop. Her first concert was Method Man and Redman. Second was 50 Cent.

At 15, intent on taking a shot at a music career, Lipa convinced her parents to let her move back to London without them, staying with a family friend and enrolling at the Sylvia Young Theatre School, whose alumni include Amy Winehouse and Rita Ora. A few years later, "it came to the point where I had to decide what I wanted to do for university, and I didn't know," Lipa

says. "I knew the only thing I wanted to do was music. So I was like, 'Let me just take a year out and see what happens.'" Before that year was through, she'd landed her major-label deal.

**W**HEN SHE'S DONE REHEARSING at *SNL*, Lipa gets into the back of a car and heads to her hotel, on the Lower East Side. Paparazzi have been waiting for her here on and off, but none are in sight at the moment. We try to grab a table at the hotel restaurant, but they don't open for another half-hour. We stand in the lobby, plotting our next move.

Downtime is rare for Lipa these days. A few nights ago, she was up in Montreal for a headlining concert. Not long before that, she was in Jamaica, at the venerable Geejam Studios, hashing out songs for her next album. "I want it to still be pop, but lean more toward soulful," she says of the project. "My voice kind of lends itself to that genre." She lists some of the things she's been drawing on for inspiration: "Electric Chair," by Prince; the new Francis and the Lights album; a lot of Outkast. She's put in time in the studio in recent months with platinum-certified hitmakers like Mark Ronson and pop mastermind Max Martin. "I spent a week with Max, and it was the first time where I felt like there was a lot more method to the things I was writing about. First with him you lay down the melodies, listen to them over and over again, and say, 'Maybe we should change this note.'" When it came to writing lyrics, "You couldn't use the same words too often, next to each other. And not everything can start on the one, because it doesn't keep it as interesting. I played him some of the stuff I did in Jamaica, and he'd say, 'You could totally simplify this. Just repeat that twice. Make it easier for the listener.' He has, like, a lot of rules and theories."

That sort of systematic approach appeals to Lipa, who keeps dozens of running lists on her phone, which she pulls out to show me: "This is, like, the 100 books I should read before I die. I bought all of them, and my goal is to read them all." She just finished Emma Cline's Manson-murders-inspired *The Girls* and loved it. Now she's in the middle of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. "I think it helps with my songwriting," she says.

There's still time to kill before the restaurant will seat us. "Are you opposed to eating dessert before you eat dinner?" she asks. We walk down the block to an ice cream parlor. "This is, like, the third day in a row I've come here," she notes, digging a spoon into a cup of vegan vanilla something-or-other. "I don't want to ruin my appetite," she says. "But sometimes you've got to break the rules." **2**