

The English Woman

The bombshell:
Adele

Uncompromising, forthright and blessed with a voice that's "like listening to God", Adele is a force to be reckoned with. Christa D'Souza meets the new soul sensation. Photographs by Sølve Sundsbø



"I don't want to be the face of this or that," Adele says. "I'm only 23. I may change my mind down the line, but right now, I don't want my name near another brand. Besides, if I was going to be the face of anything, it should be the face of full-fat Coke. Ha!"
Silk dress, to order, Burberry.
Diamond earrings, price on request, Bulgari.
Hair: Samantha Hillerby.
Make-up: Charlotte Tilbury.
Nails: Anatole Rainey.
Set design: Andy Hillman.
Digital artwork: Digital Light.
Fashion editor: Kate Phelan

Shepherd's Bush Empire. Adele is playing for one night only and the music-hall-like venue could not be more packed. It's hot, there is standing room only and the screw-top wine is appalling, but even for those hell-bent on disliking live gigs the atmosphere is electric.

Suddenly out of the darkness rings that soulful, bell-like voice with the opening bars of "Hometown Glory", the bestselling hit off her first album, *19*, which she wrote when she was still a student.

Thirty seconds later, to the frenzied hysteria of the crowd – friends such as Mark Ronson, James Corden and Alan Carr scattered within it – the lights fling up. On she half totters, half runs, in a sparkly black brocade dress, her ginger-biscuit hair pinned back in Beyoncé-style ringlets. Theatrically she fans her creamy, ample bosom, then jumps up and down, clenching and unclenching doll-like fists to convey that for her, too, this is an awfully big moment. Eventually, unable to carry on over the din, she grabs a drumstick and raps a stand with it, like a conductor. All at once the shrieking mutates into an obedient singalong: "Round my hometown/ Memories are fresh/ Round my hometown/ Ooh, the people I've met..."

Adele. Or Adele Laurie Blue Adkins, as it says on her passport. Doesn't matter if you are not particularly into the whole Brit "torch singer" thing. Doesn't even matter if you are not particularly into music. You will know of Adele. You will, even if only subliminally, have heard of "Someone Like You", the ballad she wrote about a botched love affair, which she performed at the Brits, making everyone (including herself) cry. Right now, there is no one who appeals quite this globally, who connects as much, from the 15-year-old boy who's had his heart broken for the first time to the fiftysomething who's on her fourth divorce. Or, for that matter, the nine-year-old who likes a catchy tune. Not only has *21*, her second album, sold 3.5 million copies since being released at the start of this year, it broke the Number One record for a solo female artist, staying there for 11 consecutive weeks – two weeks longer than Madonna's *Immaculate Collection* in 1990. And then there's the lovefest between her, her childhood heroine Beyoncé and Jay-Z; Jay-Z who invited Adele to join Beyoncé on stage at Glastonbury (she couldn't, she had laryngitis) and Beyoncé who once compared the act of listening to Adele as "like listening to God". All this. And she is just 23. And a very sussed 23-year-old at that, as a mutual friend in the record business jokingly warns the week before I meet her. "Just go prepared," is all he will say. "She is... *formidable*." > 302



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Metallic lace dress, £1,280,
Clements Ribeiro. Vintage
diamanté earrings, from
a selection, Gillian Horsup,
Grays Antique Market.
*For stockists, all pages,
see Vogue Information*



Two months have gone by since that Shepherd's Bush gig and she has been given the all-clear by her doctor from that nasty bout of laryngitis. We have arranged to meet at the Notting Hill headquarters of XL, the record label clever enough to represent her right from the start. XL founder Richard Russell, whose other discoveries include Basement Jaxx, the Prodigy and MIA, has kindly lent us his office, an airy loft-like space decorated with a stuffed elephant's foot, skull fairy lights, a computer screen balanced on a dictionary and three beaten-up leather sofas, upon one of which Adele is reclining.

"Oi, oi," she says, looking up, "Adele... Nice to meet you, sit wherever you want..." and then erupts into the Catherine Tate-like "Nyahahahaha" cackle that has become such a part of her stage patter. Oh, good. She can talk. I'd been warned her voice was still very fragile. "Nah, it's not about not talking," she says briskly. "It's about talking only when you can actually touch the person. If I have to shout across the music to someone, that's when it's not good..."

If anything is manufactured about Adele, it is her whole anti-manufactured shtick:

"I get massively distracted when I have someone in my life, which I can't afford to do right now"

the lack of pyrotechnics, of fancy marketing techniques, of saucy styling. Her distinctly non-Pussycat Doll physique, meanwhile, she makes absolutely no apology for. Quite the opposite. "I don't have a message," she says, inspecting her ghetto-fabulous (if slightly chipped) nails. "I enjoy being me; I always have done. I've seen people where it rules their lives, you know, who want to be thinner or have bigger boobs, and how it wears them down. And I don't want that in my life. It's just never been an issue – at least, I've never hung out with the sort of horrible people who *make* it an issue. I have insecurities, of course, but I don't hang out with anyone who points them out to me."

Certainly she is terribly pretty in the flesh, with that luminous skin and those unflinching green eyes. Though sporting a few spots, she looks every inch the Brit diva, too, in her trademark false eyelashes and a black cocktail frock custom-made for her by Moschino, with its special Superman cape attached. "I do love a cape," she says, getting up and performing a little twirl. The only thing missing from this tableau is Louis, the beloved dachshund she named after Louis Armstrong – Louis, whose

"balls I cut off because I didn't want to breed him – God, imagine if you could do that to humans, too, nyahahahaha..."

The look, an updated version of Fifties prom, hasn't really wavered since Anna Wintour offered to style her for the Grammys last year and introduced her to the costume designer Barbara Tfank. It was Tfank who suggested she might look good in a cinch belt and, sartorially speaking, she has not looked back since. The days of the heavy fringe and the flowery Camden Market dresses and holey tights are gone. Even when she's in baggy jumpers and leggings, she'll wear a Louboutin heel and a nice bag. "I admire trends," she says. "Before I got into Johnny Cash and discovered June Carter and decided to wear nothing else but black from there on, I wore loads of colour, and like, miniskirts over jeans. But, like, now, I love old school. Chanel, Prada, you know. And Burberry, definitely. I've met Christopher [Bailey] a few times. He's definitely going to dress me for the next lot of awards – if I'm nominated. I've always loved Burberry. I remember saving for three years to get my first bag before I got signed. Five hundred quid, I think it was," she says, picking

at a nail whose tip has fallen off, "made of canvas, with the logo, like a satchel."

Those nails. As with Barbra Streisand, they are almost part of her act. I remind her of the time she once went on stage wearing a tampon with the stuffing scooped out over a finger, to protect a tip that was just about to fall off. "Yeah, but the tampon was the *doctor's* idea," she says firmly. "I didn't mean to go on with it, I just forgot to take it off."

If you look out of the window, you can just make out the flat she rented between the ages of 19 and 22, before she moved back to south-west London to be nearer to her family. "I did a show from her house as part of the *Live Lounge* tour," says Radio 1's Jo Whiley. "It was a bijou flat in west London, the kind of area where pop stars live when the money comes in. But you could tell her heart wasn't in the place – for starters, it was too far away from her mum. When she showed me round, we found her Brit award in the loo – she said it seemed fitting."

It was a lovely little flat, a stone's throw from two of her favourite places: E&O, where she used to eat "breakfast, lunch and dinner, until the paps caught on", and Ottolenghi

"where they mug you up terrible with the prices. I know that from buying the cookbook and seeing how much the ingredients really cost! But I'll pay, 'cos I love it." She is thinking of moving back to the area, not least because she can do her supermarket shopping in peace – unlike at her local Tesco, where "the manager got on the Tannoy and announced there was a bloody superstar in the store."

Not that that means she has to walk around in glasses and a wig, but she does have her little ruses. Like wearing a hoodie when she goes out for her daily walk in the park with Louis, or having her friends call out "Pam" instead of "Adele" when they've found a special deal on tomatoes or whatever – "as everybody knows, I always love a good deal". Nobody, in her wise opinion, however famous they are, needs to be hounded if they genuinely don't want to be: "Look at Meryl Streep, best actress in the world – nobody knows nothing about her, do they?"

For someone who is so honest about her feelings on stage, Adele is a lot warier in one-to-one situations. Maybe that's because she has shared so much in the past; like the time she sounded off about having to pay too much tax (her estimated worth is in the region of £8 million) or called David Cameron a right "wally". Maybe it's because others have spilled about her, too, like her dad, a recovering alcoholic who left home when she was just three and sold his story to a tabloid in March. That, compounded with the time another tabloid ambushed her grandmother, Doreen, at her local bus stop in Tottenham, got her so upset she started smoking again (she's since stopped, because of the laryngitis).

Perhaps, too, like many a professional, she turns on the "personality" only when necessary, saving up all those emotions for stage and then letting rip when she has an audience. Does she ever feel exposed up there, belting her heart out? She looks at me blankly at the idea of such a thing. "But that's the way I've always done it. I don't know any different. So it's really normal for me."

"Right from the beginning, she's had a very clear idea of where she wants to be," offers Ben Beardsworth, XL's MD, an integral part of Team Adele (which also includes Richard Russell, her wily manager Jonathan Dickins, her agent Lucy Dickins and her producer Paul Epworth). "And it's all genuine. She hasn't learnt it or been taught it on the way. That's how she's always been, right from the start. It's quite spooky to have that degree of single-mindedness and clarity of vision and confidence and drive."

"I met her when she was just 20," says Tfank, "and aside from being struck by how much she reminded me of Lynn Redgrave and Jean Shrimpton, I couldn't > 376

“I’ve seen people who want to be thinner or have bigger boobs, how it wears them down – I don’t want that in my life”

Opposite: vintage diamanté earrings, from a selection, Gillian Horsup, Grays Antique Market.

This page: lace dress, to order, Burberry. Vintage diamanté earrings, from a selection, Gillian Horsup, Grays Antique Market

believe how enlightened and knowledgeable she was for her age. How can you be that full of self-assurance when you're barely out of your teens?"

All of which conflicts somewhat with her debilitating stage fright, to such an extent that sometimes she has to be led by the hand to the stage by her tour manager in case she bolts. It is the reason she refuses to play stadiums. As Jonathan Dickins, who also manages Jamie T and Adele's great friend Jack Peñate, puts it: "Say the number 18,000 to her and you can actually *see* the colour drain out of her face." Stage fright makes her so nervous she vomits. "Projectile," she nods breezily. "Yeah, I puke quite a lot before going on stage – though never actually on stage – but then I shit myself before everything... Thing is, the bigger the freakout, the more I enjoy the show."

"Remember it takes a huge amount of strength and guts to bare your heart the way she does, to be vulnerable like that," says Epworth, who co-wrote "Rolling in the Deep". "Have you ever spoken to her on the telephone, by the way? She is *spectacularly* awkward. Always better to text or see her in person."

Born in Tottenham in 1988, Adele inherited her father's looks, she says, rather than her mother's – Penny is short, dark, into paragliding "and so opposite to me, it's hilarious". Adele was one of those little girls who sang into her hairbrush as soon as she could talk. Despite her peripatetic childhood, she describes her upbringing as extremely "wealthy", at least musically. Yes, she was into the Spice Girls and All Saints and, of course, Destiny's Child, but she also, courtesy of Penny (who bought her a piano aged just seven) listened to Tom Waits, Jeff Buckley, The Cure and 10,000 Maniacs. At secondary school, she would sometimes wear a sequined eyepatch in homage to Gabrielle.

And then, at the age of 14, while browsing through the two-for-one deals at HMV, she came across CDs by Ella Fitzgerald and Etta James (whose blues ballad "Fool that I Am" she still covers), and something clicked. That was it. No more "normal" school, where she didn't get along with her music teacher and where it seemed to Adele most of her female friends wanted to be pregnant by the age of 16. Adele (and her mum) had other plans.

And so to the Brit School, alma mater of Amy Winehouse, Leona Lewis and Jessie J, where "kids were doing pirouettes in the fucking hallway". Her first break came five years ago, while working at the Gap, when a fellow pupil posted a three-song demo on Myspace. Both Island and XL called but, imagining the latter was "some internet

perv", she did not call back. Finally Nick Huggett, XL's A&R man, saw her sing, at her eighteenth-birthday party, in a pub in Brixton. She was signed the day after she left school.

"Signing her on was one of the most easy, uncomplicated things I've ever done," says Jonathan Dickins. "From the start it was clear she had this absolute God-given talent. It was the best voice I'd heard in my life."

Two Grammys later, and Adele is her own brand now. She has a website via which you can buy pillowcases inscribed with the lyrics from "Someone Like You" and some rather sweet T-shirts emblazoned with cartoons of Louis, all overseen – if not actually designed by – Adele herself. But on the merchandise and marketing front, that is pretty much it. "I don't want to be the face of this or that," she explains simply. "I don't want to see me plastered everywhere this early in my career. Look," she adds breezily, "I'm only 23. I may change my mind down the line, but right here, right now, I don't want my name anywhere near another brand. If they offered me £10 million, I'd be like, fuck off. Besides, if I was going to be the face of anything it should be the face of full-fat Coke. Ha!"

Adele is someone you do not want to mess with. Unless you are her lover. And my goodness, has she been messed with on that front, although, as she points out, "compared to my friends, I'm not that unusual. It's only magnified because I happen to write about it." She has, she says, had three "proper" boyfriends (not counting the bisexual one she wrote "Daydreamer" about). Rotter number one was the inspiration for "Chasing Pavements" (when she found out about his cheating, she followed him down to his local pub and beat the hell out of him). Rotter number two, who inspired "Someone Like You", encouraged her to write poetry, turned her on to the writings of Zadie Smith (the book she read to the end previously was by Jacqueline Wilson), and then, as she found out via text, got engaged to someone else. (Rotter number two is also the one who wanted a cut of the royalties, but Adele wasn't having any of that.) Rotter number three is someone she has only recently been burnt by, and therefore has not had time to write a song about. His moment will surely come on 23, or whatever the new album will be called. But it won't be mean. She's never mean in her songs, just terribly bleak.

"Well, grudges wear you down," she says, wise, as ever, beyond those years. For the moment, she confirms, she is resolutely single. "I do get massively distracted when I've got someone in my life, which I can't afford to do right now. Besides, no one treats me as well as I do..."

It's not such a sob story. Advances have been made. Advances by famous people, no less – one of whom, rumour has it, was Tinie Tempah – but maddeningly she won't mention names. "I'm not really up for it," she shrugs. "I mean, imagine if I went out with someone famous and we broke up and I wrote a song. It would be fucking obvious who I was singing about, d'you know what I mean?"

She is not lonely, that's for sure, with a whole coterie of people looking after her, making sure she gets up early in the morning ("the house could be burning down and I wouldn't wake up"). She has her mother, she has Team Adele and she has her gang of mostly male friends: "I've always got on better with boys. Most of my friends are boys. Like, if I have children, I want five boys. Boys love their mothers whereas girls can be so mean to each other."

It's a two-way support network that, she firmly reminds me, "I look after *too*." She loves treating her friends and family. She's not going to charter a boat this summer because she loathes the sea, and she's not going to take a house in the South of France because of her fear of flying ("I could walk, I suppose"), but she might get a big old house in Cornwall and cook for them all. "I love cooking and I'm really good at following recipes. My thing now is the Ottolenghi cookbook's sweet-potato gratin. You've not had it? Oh my God. *Amazing*."

Boyfriends have been also beneficiaries of her largesse. Rotter number one, for example, got taken to Italy because she thought that might be a romantic thing to do, in spite of her fear of flying. "See, this is what I miss about not having a partner. It could all be a dream in 20 years and I'd love to be able to share that with someone and carry on with that throughout our lives. A shared dream. That's the only thing I miss."

It's three days later; I've just seen Adele perform another faultless and massively oversubscribed set at London's Roundhouse. After the show she invites me backstage to say hello. After waiting 20 minutes or so for her to get de-Spanxed, I am ushered into a little tent and there she sits, all by herself, looking resplendent as ever in a Stella McCartney poncho and Miu Miu shoes.

On her lap is Louis, who eyes me warily while I lavish compliments on his mistress. Remembering the nail polish I admired the last time we met (the talons are painted red tonight), she excuses herself, returning with a little bottle she brought with her especially to give to me. Louis obediently follows. A woman done wrong she may be, but goodness, is she adored by that dog. ■