

Generation NEXT

WITH SMARTS,
TALENT, AND A
HOCKEY-PLAYING
BOYFRIEND TO BOOT,
R&B SENSATION
*Keshia
Chanté*
IS POISED FOR
TOTAL DOMINATION.

By Jordana Divan

IT'S TAKEN FOUR MONTHS, three rescheduled interviews, two mix-ups and one missed phone call to get Keshia Chanté on the line. The math speaks for itself: the bright-eyed Canadian songstress is busy.

So busy, in fact, that her schedule sounds like it was assembled by a dedicated team of sadists. Without a breather from the recent Asia leg of her *Night & Day* album tour, Chanté is in heavy promotional mode for her new single (a mid-tempo jam called "I Miss You"), flitting around the country to film Canadian talent series *The Next Star* (she's one of the celebrity judges), squeezing in studio time to work on her next album, hitting the requisite number of obligatory press events and flying back and forth from Toronto to Chicago where she shares a home with her boyfriend, Blackhawks brawler Ray Emery.

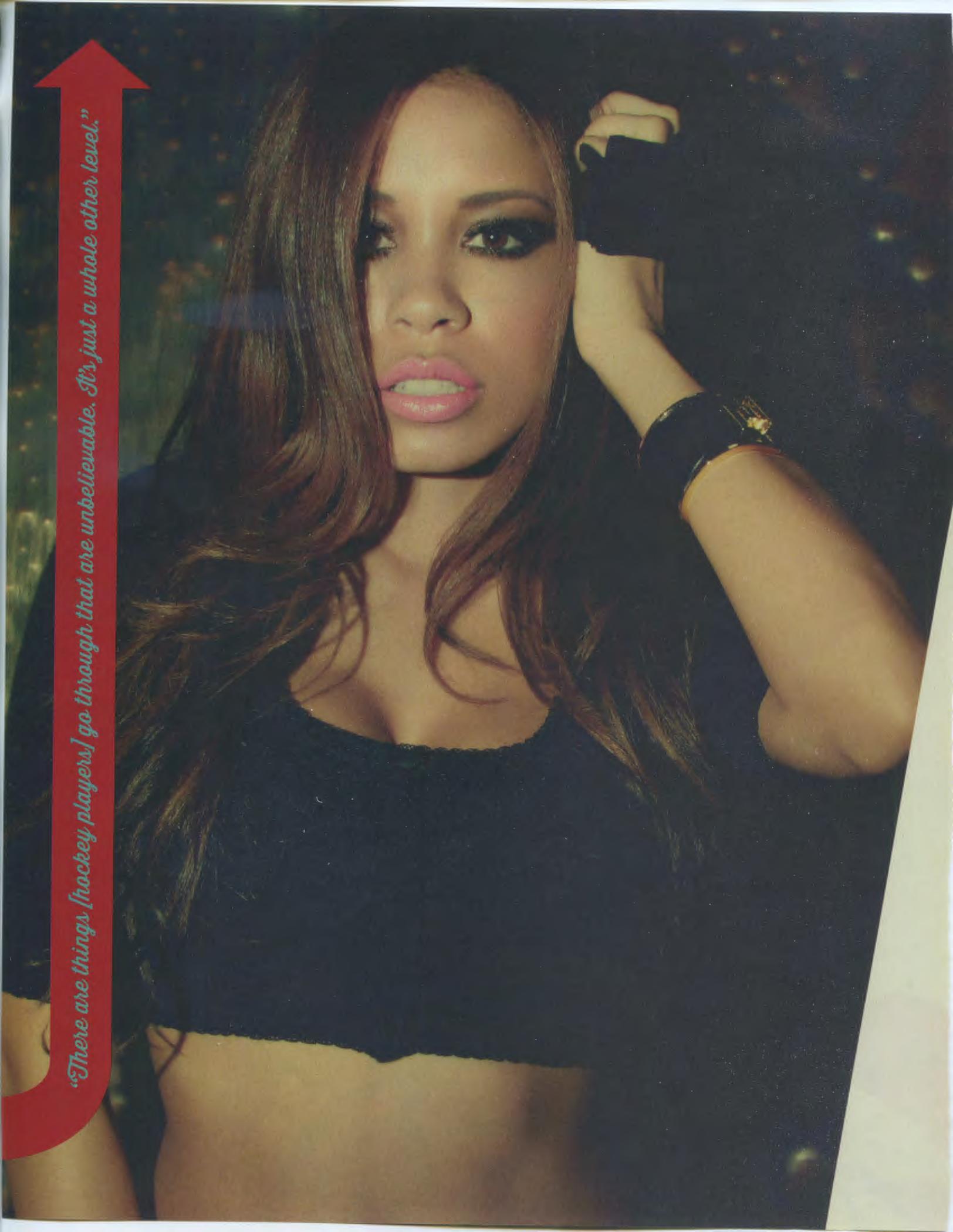
Within minutes of speaking to the 24-year-old R&B pop veteran it becomes clear that this madness is entirely of her own design.

"I love feeling really busy and I love feeling pressure," she says with a confident clip. "I don't know what it is [to relax]. I like feeling like there are too many things to do in a day and trying to make it all happen. And I've kind of been like that since I started."

That start date kicked off a decade ago, when a tiny 13-year-old with an unusually polished voice began generating the sort of buzz reserved for the Next Big Thing. The only child of a Trinidadian father and a mother from Cape Verde, Keshia Chanté Harper was plucked from her Ottawa home and groomed by Sony BMG record executives to fill an important void in a Canadian urban music scene, a landscape that, at the time, lacked a truly accessible young female superstar.

Early singles like "Bad Boy" and "Does He Love Me?" soon found frequent rotation across national radio stations and music channels (back when they still aired videos) and a teenaged romance with





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Drake – another Next Big Thing – provided enough fodder to keep gossipy tongues clacking about more than her musical output: sadly an industry prerequisite in the tabloid age.

But a Juno Award (the Canadian equivalent of a Grammy) and some career-making buzz on BET's 106 and Park have separated the singer from her pack of Can-Pop contemporaries. A recent foray into dance music has also diversified her sound and given the singer more airplay than ever on rigidly formulaic Top 40 playlists, though Chanté remains dedicated to the genre that put her on the map. "I'm always going to be an R&B singer and I'm always going to love making R&B pop music. I've been writing now and I've made two-dozen songs and they're all really R&B, but who knows? I might fall in love with house music tomorrow and decide I want to do a half-house album. And that's the beauty of being an artist," she explains.

An artist dedicated to her native land despite the fact that Canadians have a terrible track record when it comes to supporting our own; we seem to demand that our talent make it big in the States first, as though our tastes must somehow be validated. It's been a long-standing tragedy that few Canadian artists, no matter how gifted, enjoy the same degree of fan frenzy as a Justin Bieber or Avril Lavigne. Even Vancouver's reigning pop princess, Carly Rae Jepsen, had to catch the ear of America before we paid her any mind. (Now we're lining up to put her on magazine covers before American interest in her YouTube cover-spawning hit "Call Me Maybe" wanes.) But despite the lure of several major U.S. record deals, Chanté is choosing to risk it on the homefront.

"I've been given a lot of opportunities in America, ones that probably could have propelled me to crazy heights," she admits. "But I'm at a point where I'm not interested in selling myself. I don't want to sell my soul. And unfortunately, three or four of the deals that came up, deals that were massive, basically I wouldn't have any control. I would be someone else's puppet and I've been doing this for too long to just do that."

Part of Chanté's resolve comes from the time she took off from singing to learn the industry ropes. The young singer perched at the foot of mentor, lawyer and former

Sony BMG Vice President, Christine "CJ" Prudham, and armed herself with the legal knowhow to take control of her brand.

"Being an artist is fun but just being an artist doesn't get you to where you want to be," the forward-thinking star details. "I learned about budgets, royalties, mechanicals, legal things, how record labels make their money, the route they go. I learned why it's important to own your own music. And I wanted to own my own music. I thought that was a really cool thing, to be your own boss."

Not that she was ever anyone's pushover. Chanté credits a close, supportive family, trustworthy team members that have been with her from the start, and an ability to "think like a man" in a heavily male-dominated industry as the backbone of her survival.

"Even as a kid I was always around adults and growing up I always had a lot of guy friends. I understand the psyche of a man," she says. "Sometimes there's an energy of 'Well, what are you going to do for me?' I know that's really big in the States, not



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Another male-dominated industry she's come to understand well is the NHL. While her musical pursuits kept her from getting into hockey as a teen, the artist has more than compensated for lost time since shacking up with Blackhawks goalie Ray Emery.

"I do have a newfound appreciation. There are things [hockey players] go through that are unbelievable. It's just a whole other level," she says. "When [Blackhawks winger Marián] Hossa got hit I was bawling my eyes out. I was worried about him. I was worried about his wife. All the wives and girlfriends on the team, the things that they go through, it's crazy. It's an interesting world but it's really fun to watch."

The couple met years ago at Emery's Halloween party back when he stopped pucks for the Senators ("Fortunately, it's very boring in Ottawa so I was like, OK, this is probably going to be the best party," she cracks) but it wasn't until Emery's devastating avascular necrosis diagnosis in 2009 that their friendship transformed into something deeper.

"It was a pretty dark time [for him] but that's when he reached out and said, I could really use a friend," she relates. "They didn't think he could walk again, let alone play, and to see him in that state of mind, and me being in the state where I was really over the music industry, we were both in dark places, but we found something in one another to get through it and then it just kind of made sense."

Two years strong, the lovebirds flit between their homes in Chicago and Mississauga – a city just west of Toronto. And here's where being your own boss also has its perks: Chanté is able to build her schedule around Emery's home games. That means from September and April she's on a plane to The Windy City twice a week, often to the great confusion of her boyfriend's teammates.

"They think I'm crazy. It's funny. We go to a game and they'll be like, 'Were you here yesterday?' And I'll be like, 'No,' and they'll say, 'But you were at the game two nights ago, where were you in between?' And I'll say, 'Oh I was in Toronto, I had to go to an event and just flew back.' But it's such a short flight so it's good."

Young, aspiring artists, take note. This is the attitude that makes "having it all" possible. ■