

QUEEN B

The unstoppable Beyoncé has transcended the music scene to become one of the world's most powerful women. *STEPHANIE THEOBALD* meets the icon to talk about about Glastonbury, her sisterhood with Gwyneth and Gaga, and life with Jay-Z

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Bven before Beyoncé Knowles enters the Imperial Suite at the Ritz in Paris for her final shot, there are epic overtones to the scene: the mishmash of Louis XIV opulence and Napoleonic swagger adorned with sphinxes, griffons and winged chimeras under a ceiling six metres high. But when she finally makes her entrance, over six foot tall in Louboutins and Gucci, far from being dwarfed by such grandeur, Beyoncé looks terrifying. She sashays towards the balcony, pausing at a mirror to stare unflinchingly at what she sees; she steps out onto the balcony, revealing herself to the awe-struck people in the Place Vendôme below. One arm punches the sky in Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* mode (one of the dance moves for her single 'Run the World (Girls)', from 4, her fourth album), as if inciting all her female fans to world domination. A signal met with both impassioned wails – 'Bey-on-say: on vous adore!' 'Bey-on-say: s'il vous plaît!' – and courteous applause. For a moment, she holds her iconic statue pose, then tumbles giggling back into the room, tugging at her heels. 'Oh, my gosh,' she exclaims as she pulls them off. 'They are so polite in Paris.'

The term 'iconic' circles the global phenomenon that is Beyoncé Knowles: the most successful US artist of the Noughties (since going solo in 2003) and one of the bestselling female artists of all time. Singer, songwriter, producer, actress, philanthropist, multi-tasking being; she is less performer than quasi-religious force, named by *Forbes* this year as one of the World's 10 Most Powerful Women; and she is only just now turning 30. 'This is such a pivotal moment in my life,' she tells me excitedly when we adjourn to

'When Beyoncé sings about empowerment, it is genuine. She understands the power it is to be a woman' – GWYNETH PALTROW

another elaborate room of the Ritz, this one a replica of Marie Antoinette's bedroom in Versailles. 'I'm transitioning as a woman, and I'm finally able to express myself as I am.'

By now, Beyoncé has reappeared in her more mortal incarnation: barefoot in a pair of short cut-offs and a baggy T-shirt. The daunting Beyoncé of half an hour ago has all but disappeared, but even in such off-duty attire she is inescapably regal. Her physique is as sculpted as a Renaissance statue, and her skin has an almost supernatural glow. She has recently learned about the 'Saturn return', the supposed astrological wake-up call during the often-traumatic jump from 29 to 30. (She turns 30 on 4 September, and is thinking of an intimate TriBeCa dinner with her husband Shawn Carter, aka Jay-Z, and her closest friends.) 'I read about it recently, and it was chilling because I'm becoming even more of myself, and I can't wait to start the next chapter...'

Things in Beyoncé-world are already changing. She has recently relieved her father, Mathew Knowles, of his long-held duties as her manager, and has founded her own artist-development company, Parkwood Music Entertainment. For the first time in her life, the full force of her power is placed firmly in her own hands.

She no longer needs to invoke her fearless alter ego, Sasha Fierce, to help her combat stage fright. Beyoncé has never been more confident or in control of her own destiny.

That destiny today comprises a raft of business and creative ventures, from her recently released album, 4, to the launch of her fashion line House of Deréon in the UK, as well as a third fragrance, Pulse (bottling Beyoncé's essence has proved to be liquid gold); and a new lead role in Clint Eastwood's adaptation of the musical film *A Star Is Born*. The part holds a special significance for Beyoncé; her mother introduced her to the 1954 version, starring Judy Garland and James Mason, when she was a child, and Beyoncé is to fill an American legend's shoes: 'To play the Judy Garland role is such a huge honour,' she says, her face radiant.

She should be smiling. It's not unfeasible that the film will rocket her acting career to new heights, given Eastwood's ability to attract the attention of the Academy Awards, and her own genuine thespian talents. In both *Dreamgirls* and *Cadillac Records*, the latter of which she also executive-produced, Beyoncé's turns shine, aided by her face's natural expressiveness (those shining eyes, the quivering lips...) and an endless capacity for compassion.

It is these qualities, in addition to her attitudinal dance tunes, warbling melisma and bodacious warrior moves, that elevate the singer's performances to a higher realm. At her headlining gig on the Pyramid Stage at Glastonbury this year, clad in a gold sequin jacket and towering ankle boots, she was part super-diva, part supernatural being, leaving us in no doubt as to who ruled the world. It was a show that will surely enter the almanacs of musical legend at the level of Jimi Hendrix's 1969 Isle of Wight Festival gig, or Michael Jackson's 1983 appearance, moonwalking on *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever*.

Surrounded by a triumphant orgy of fireworks, lasers, a giant pyramid and her all-female band – shaking her crimped mane, strutting defiantly, gyrating lithely – she emitted back-to-back power anthems, from 'Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)' (a song whose accompanying dance has famous fans from Barack Obama to Justin Timberlake) to 'Survivor' and Etta James' 'At Last', in front of a female-heavy audience – all in the name of woman power.

'A woman has not headlined in 20 years, so this is history for me,' she cried. The empowerment she dispensed on the crowd was palpable; as always, tinged with reciprocal empathies. 'Right now, you are witnessing my dream. I always wanted to be a rock star. Tonight, we are all rock stars. Forget about your worries, your troubles, get lost in this music tonight,' leaving the audience infused with feelgood messages of love and self-worth. 'When Beyoncé sings about female empowerment, it works because it is genuine,' says close friend Gwyneth Paltrow after the performance. 'She loves women, she respects women, she leans on women. And she understands the power it is to be a woman. It translates and inspires because she means it, she is on our side, it's real.'

For Beyoncé is a woman with magnetic people power – a fact not lost on some of the world's most influential players. There could be no more concrete proof of the force and range of Beyoncé's influence than her performance at President Obama's inauguration in 2009, nor her position as a role model in her recent enlisting by Michelle Obama (now a close friend, as too is Oprah Winfrey) for her 'Let's Move!' anti-childhood-obesity campaign.

In fashion, Tom Ford bade her model his debut womenswear collection for S/S 11, alongside Julianne Moore and Lauren



TURN IT ON
 Beyoncé at the Hôtel Ritz Paris. Silk and leather jacket, £3,260, Hermès. Calf-skin and crystal heels, £1,070, Lanvin. White gold, onyx and diamond necklace from a selection, Cartier. Silver bracelet, £2,790, Hermès. Previous page: silk organza dress, from a selection, Armani Privé



QUEEN OF THE NIGHT
Silk and crystal dress, from a selection,
Azzaro. Leather heels, about £445,
Cesare Paciotti. Rhodium-plated metal
and crystal bracelet, £750, Dior

Hutton. 'I have always found her one of the most inspirational women in the world,' he says. 'Her allure is that of a strong, powerful and extremely sexy woman, but her appeal is also in her incredible warmth and humanity.' (Ford was seen at Beyoncé's post-Glastonbury gig singing enthusiastically along to 'Irreplaceable' – 'To the left, to the left!' – complete with accompanying arm gestures.) She has been the face of fragrance campaigns for Tommy Hilfiger and Emporio Armani. 'There is no one who transcends music, film and fashion in the way that Beyoncé does,' Giorgio Armani tells me.

In philanthropy, the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund called on her to join forces with Bono and George Clooney. And, in popular culture, she is worshipped by Lady Gaga: their collaboration 'Telephone', along with its notorious video, caused global furore, receiving 18 million YouTube views in four days. ('She nailed the dance routine and the dialogue in the car in just an hour,' the video's director Jonas Akerlund tells me. 'She showed up in the middle of the desert, rehearsed in a parking lot, and then just went in and killed it.')

But as her self-penned anthems testify, despite her teenage struggles for fame and recognition, the adult Beyoncé is not beyond recognising her own self-worth. Alongside her fragrance and entertainment companies, she has signed endorsement deals with some of the world's biggest brands – including Pepsi, Nintendo and L'Oréal – and recently sold House of Deréon to an American company, while remaining joint creative director with her mother Tina. She and her husband, global hip-hop icon Jay-Z, are, according to *Forbes*, 'one of the most influential couples in the world'; and when they entered Guinness World Records last year as the 'highest earning power couple', it was Beyoncé who held the majority \$87 million stake in their combined annual \$112 million income.

Meanwhile, conjoining with Paltrow and Chris Martin as official 'best friends' has made them one of the most beguiling foursomes in the industry (with a star-fascination ratio that, even by showbiz standards, is tantalisingly off-the-scale). Note the artists' mutual support at Glastonbury, Martin (along with Bono) giving advice to Beyoncé on her setlist; he and Paltrow huddled in the VIP arena to support 'Queen B' (nicknamed 'Auntie B' by their offspring), in return for Beyoncé's wild cheers of encouragement at the Coldplay gig the previous night.

It's a transatlantic friendship that has strengthened in recent years. 'We have very similar values,' Paltrow tells me. 'We have also been able to become each other's support systems over the years, as none of us needs anything from the other.' The Paltrow-Martin clan now often fly to visit the couple in New York, and vice versa, with Beyoncé and Jay-Z preferring to stay at their friends' Belsize Park home rather than at a glitzy hotel when in our own fair capital. It is hard, but thrilling, to imagine the laid-back king of hip-hop and his queen strolling, shades on, among the coffee shops of North London with the Martins in tow. Though one suspects that the eyes of some Belsize Park mums have popped a few times, clocking Paltrow's driving companion – Queen B Beyoncé – on the morning school run ('People flip out when they see her,' cries Paltrow. 'It's Beyoncé, for God's sake!').

Paltrow's burgeoning singing career, including her musical role in *Country Strong*, was helped by observing Beyoncé onstage. 'She is what it means to be a superstar. No one else can sing and dance like that, while having humour and genuine, bursting sweetness.

She has her own recipe for it... I wanted my character to have some of that mega-wattage. So I studied B. She was my homework.' Meanwhile, Beyoncé is equally in awe of her friend's musical forays – 'She pushes her boundaries all the time' – and her homemaking: 'You go to her house and she makes you feel like you never want to go home. She is what I strive to be one day.'

If that sounds like the patter of tiny Knowles-Carter feet, it may be (one day). For, despite rumours that things have been rocky between Beyoncé and Jay-Z in recent weeks, the pair appear to be well on track here in Paris, though they have been hunted mercilessly by the press. At one point during the shoot, Beyoncé confides to a member of her entourage that 'he was out last night until two in the morning'. But it is said in the indulgent tone of someone admitting they spent too much money on their lover's birthday present (she bought him a \$2 million Bugatti Veyron Grand Sport car for his 41st, while he reportedly bought her \$350,000 worth of designer handbags last Christmas); and with the broad grin of someone still very much in love.

Relations with her father Mathew, meanwhile, have been not so smooth of late. The former Xerox salesman from Houston, Texas, who quit his job when Beyoncé was 12 in order to nurture his daughters' musical ambitions (and the group that would eventually become Destiny's Child, one of the most successful girl bands of all time) has been removed from his duties by Beyoncé. Stories abound of his obsessive management style and the bootcamp-like training that he devised for the young hopefuls. Whether these are true or not, Beyoncé was for a long time happy to submit to her father's often-unrelenting strictures.

But no more. Letting go of Mathew was 'a business decision', she

'Her allure is that of a strong and extremely sexy woman, but her appeal is also in her incredible warmth and humanity' – TOM FORD

tells me, in as matter-of-fact a tone as possible, although rumours suggest that friction arose as the result of his recently revealed affair with actor Aleksandra Wright (who, a year and a half ago, gave birth to Beyoncé's half-brother, Nixon). Her mother, the long-suffering Tina Knowles, is filing for divorce; Mathew has undergone treatment for sex addiction in the past. Beyoncé's face tightens visibly when I bring up her father. A new reticence appears, and with it, an obvious sadness. Her pupils seem larger, deeper, easier to fall into. I witness that hypnotic Beyoncé empathy first-hand. 'Everything is being tested right now, everything is changing,' she says, shaking her head, though her eyes speak of things unsaid.

Meanwhile, her relationship with her mother – who is of French, African, Spanish and Native American descent – is as strong as ever, and one feels the importance of female bonds in her family: 'Beyoncé' is her mother's maiden name, and her fashion label House of Deréon is named after her maternal grandmother. Beyoncé's allegiance to women has always been fierce, right back to the days when, as a child, she hung out at her mother's beauty salon in Houston, where she swept up hair and 'eavesdropped on conversations'.

'I loved listening to people's problems. It was like a sanctuary for those women. It was a place you didn't bring your children, and your husbands weren't there.' ('I'm afraid when women never hang around other women,' she says later with a shrug. 'That's a little scary to me – why is that?') It was Tina who took Beyoncé – 'this



BORN FOR THIS

Silk and wool dress, £1,980; calf-skin and metal cut-out wedges, £850, both Lanvin. Yellow gold, onyx, diamond and emerald bracelet, from a selection, Cartier. Yellow gold ring (just seen), £3,400, Dior

big, strong, kind of chubby kid who wanted to be on the sidelines,' says Tina – to dancing lessons when she was seven, to cure her of shyness. It was here that her dream was born, beginning the decade-long struggle for the Knowles family (as well as a period of low self-esteem for the young teenager), who fought hard for their daughters, Beyoncé and her younger sister Solange, now 25, and their ascent to stardom: as the sassy Supremes of the new millennium.

There could be no more emblematic anthems for career women in the early 2000s than Destiny's Child's 'Survivor' and 'Independent Women Part I', and this sense of feminine pride and solidarity has never waned, even after the break-up of the band, when Beyoncé went solo. But she wouldn't really go so far as to call herself a feminist, she says. 'I don't really feel that it's necessary to define it. It's just something that's kind of natural for me, and I feel like... you know... it's, like, what I live for.' She pauses thoughtfully, then jokes: 'I need to find a catchy new word for "feminism", right? Like "bootylicious"...' (which is, of course, the title of one of the many hits she wrote and produced while in Destiny's Child).

Yet the fact that Beyoncé is non-confrontational does not mean that she is not also slyly seditious. Take her all-female backing band, Suga Mama, the idea for which came to her in a dream. 'What a great dream! We were all just rocking it and we felt connected.'

When she told her all-male band about it the next day ('Guys, I'm sorry, but I had a dream that I had a female band'), they were sceptical to say the least. 'They're like, "You'll never ever find them..."'

Thanks to Beyoncé, you now have crowds watching in awe as tattooed black girls in bondage trousers (never previously offered up as possible role models) tear into guitar and sax solos, under the teasing entreaties of their Queen B: 'Crystal! Tia! You bad girl!'

Back in the Ritz, she chuckles as she recalls how her pro-woman stance got her into trouble recently during a concert in Egypt. 'There were a lot of women in the audience in burkas. They were singing along to "Irreplaceable" – it was amazing!' Rows of black-cloth-draped women were punching their fists into the air and lip-synching to the paean to ditching complacent boyfriends: 'I could have another you by tomorrow/So don't

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you ever for a second get to thinking you're irreplaceable...'

Suddenly, men started dragging their wives out. 'Some of them got really upset! They were like, "We have to get you out of here!"'

In Egypt, Beyoncé's powers are potentially revolutionary. But what about in the West? Do men feel threatened by her shows? 'Yeah, I guess some of them do get annoyed.' But she adds that she never wanted to do 'the banner thing'.

As with feminism, Beyoncé says she never wanted to overtly push the black-rights agenda, and yet her success, like that of the Obamas, represents how those movements have radically changed the world. When MTV launched in 1981 (the year Beyoncé was born), you'd have been hard-pressed to find many music videos by black artists other than Michael Jackson. Thankfully, things have come a long way since then (though her recent cover of French magazine *L'Officiel*, in which she wore tribal make-up and had

her skin darkened, provoked stern criticism from certain quarters): 'I never want to be preachy,' she says almost bashfully.

For all her wholesomeness, Beyoncé has never been afraid of a little controversy, especially in the name of *independent women*. What better display of contemporary feminine power than her duet with Lady Gaga, a collaboration that has been dissected not only in the international music press, but in broadsheet columns? The pair clicked immediately when they met at a charity event. Gaga struck Beyoncé as 'compassionate' and 'fearless'. 'She's not afraid. I love that.' When Gaga called Beyoncé to invite her to perform on 'Telephone', and appear in the video, 'she wanted me to do something crazy, and so I just rolled with it'. Beyoncé's idea of something really transgressive was to eat a famous American variety of sticky doughnut called a honey bun. 'I told Gaga I thought I should have a honey bun. It's the worst food you could eat, but it is the best thing for me because I hadn't had one since I was a kid.'

She adds: 'My concept in the video is that I kill people with honey. Kind of like killing people with kindness... I'm a nice murderer.'

A nice murderer with an all-too-human side: the only moment when Beyoncé looks a little guilty during our conversation is when she talks about her love of 'all that stuff you're not supposed to eat, such as cheeseburgers, fries and honey buns'. Of course, the fact that Beyoncé loves food so publicly, and admits to embarking on crash diets, only makes her more appealing to our collective psyche. During the filming of *Dreamgirls*, she underwent a 10-day liquid diet consisting of water mixed with maple syrup, lemon and cayenne pepper, during which she dropped 20 pounds.

'I ate 12 cupcakes in one go the minute we finished!' she says, with such a rich laugh that the enjoyment of that act is almost palpable. It's something any woman can empathise with.

It is this touch of humanity, in a woman who, onstage, appears almost super-human in her powerful invulnerability, that is the magic ingredient in the Beyoncé Effect. She has suffered like the rest of us, and sometimes you feel that she still might suffer; just a little, at least. There's a telling moment at the end of her recent *I Am... Tour* DVD when a washed-out-looking Beyoncé seems about to break down.

'Why did God give me this life?' she asks the camera, her lip wobbling like a novice nun having doubts about her calling. 'Sometimes it's overwhelming...'

One gets the impression that it can be exhausting being Beyoncé all the time, but the singer insists that the only way forward is to keep on pushing boundaries, to overcome every fear. In the video for 'Run the World (Girls)', she rides around like a warrior queen on the back of a stallion, chanting for feminine power, despite being utterly petrified that the horse would gallop out of control: 'He was huge and intimidating. And there was smoke and loud sounds and fire and he was getting a bit freaked out. But the camera was on, so I pretended I was OK...' With that, Beyoncé flashes me a quick grin and tells me not to worry, because 'as terrified as I am in the inside, I'm very good at pretending'.

It is an image that extends beyond mere pop culture to capture the essence of Beyoncé Knowles: self-governing woman, unwitting feminist idol and empowering role model for the people. She is our very own, very sexy, Boudicca of our age. □

Beyoncé's latest album '4' is out now; Pulse goes on sale in September.

To see an exclusive behind-the-scenes video of Beyoncé's ultra-glamorous shoot at the Ritz in Paris, visit harpersbazaar.co.uk



RAPPED SOUL IN THINE EYES
Viscose and lamé dress, about £3,270, Azzedine Alaïa. Rhodium-plated metal and crystal bracelet, £750, Dior.
See Stockists for details. Hair by Neal Farinah at Balan Inc. Make-up by Francesca Tolot at Cloutier/Remix. Manicure by Cristina Conrad at Calliste. With special thanks to the Hôtel Ritz Paris