



# all of Estelle

Sinem Bilen-Onabanjo

“

Sometimes I wonder, do you recognise the woman standing in front of you?” Estelle asks halfway through our interview – not literally, but quoting from the second single “Thank You” – written by Akon, produced by Jerry Wonder – from her upcoming album. Frankly, by the time we wrap up FAB’s 30-minutes face time with UK’s biggest R&B export, which feels more like a seminar on self-belief and personal growth (delivered with an all-American confidence mixed with typically British cool), the answer is a resounding no. Estelle is all grown up, all confident, all woman. Gone is the 20-something London girl with steely brashness; here is a woman in her early 30s with a mellower, quieter confidence – still peppered, thank goodness, with nuggets of sharp observation and the occasional potty mouth.

Talking of her upbringing in an Afro-Caribbean household – in the truest sense of the word, as the product of a Senegalese mother and Granadian father – in West Kensington, Estelle says, “You know, it’s a certain level of real classy upbringing that you just don’t get in other cultures and that you just don’t get in other countries. And it served me well because as I get older and travel, all I get is, ‘You’re so classy’ and I’m like, ‘Cause I know how to sit? You should hear me when I talk; I curse like a sailor, it’s amazing.”

The early part of Estelle’s life growing up in London in a large family of eight brothers and sisters and an extended family of cousins, is well documented in her 2004 break out single “1980” (“I grew up in the 1980s/ In a 4-bedroom house/ My family, my Grandma/3 or 4 aunts/ Uncles and Brothers/ In and out of prison daily”).

In a 2008 interview with *Blues&Soul Magazine*, she attributed her perseverance to succeed in life to her upbringing: “Yes, we were poor and it could be looked back on as a really bad life, it never felt like that at the time at all [...] But, after seeing the things my mum had to go through, I guess it has taught me to have a get-up-and-go attitude to life.

You know, don’t wait for anyone to do it for you! Make it happen!”

And that is exactly what Estelle did. Within a year of her debut release, despite the chart success of “1980”, the subsequent single “Free” and a Mobo Award for Best Newcomer, Estelle parted ways with V2 Records due to differences of musical opinion, and headed Stateside. A chance meeting with Kanye West outside Roscoe’s House of Chicken in LA and signing on to John Legend’s newly-formed HomeSchool Records saw Estelle come back with a bang in 2008 with the international hit “American Boy”. The song reached the top 10 in many countries worldwide as well as achieving number-one status on the UK Singles Chart, heralding the success of Estelle’s sophomore effort *Shine*, which would be certified gold by the British Phonographic Industry and shortlisted for the prestigious 2008 Mercury Music Prize, establishing her as the international breakthrough act. The soul sister had well and truly ‘broken the US’ and made a comeback to the UK charts, if not soul.

What does she make of the UK acts such as Tinie Tempah, Taio Cruz and her once arch nemesis Adele (In an interview back in 2008, in true Estelle style, she brazenly declared, “Adele ain’t soul” in her

criticism of British media’s blindness to black talents and the proverbial excrement hit the fan) that are now fast gaining fame across the pond?

“I feel like The Mother,” Estelle laughs, “I feel proud and happy that I pushed so hard and did what I did, and everyone else is pushing so hard and we’re all here – it’s good, and everyone’s doing it on their terms. We’re crossing the boundaries, we’re all saying ‘ish’ [in] different currency now ‘cause you go to America and Tinie’s doing his own thing, you go to Australia, and you’ve got American artists who would never touch Australia, touching Australia – you’re seeing both directions of it. And it’s good, it’s what it’s meant to be. Music is music, why be held to one area or one perception of it? Let it be what it is.”

More tactful than her fast-talking 28-year-old self, Estelle also touches upon the whole Adele drama, “Listen, that was then, this is now, and I think I respect that and I’m sure she does. I respect the hell out of anybody that’s still relevant, that still is working nowadays. You can’t be mad at this job – like what the hell? What do we look like being peeved off at doing this job or each other when people don’t have jobs? And it wasn’t the intent behind any of the statements, so I can’t really focus on that or go hard

on that stuff. And now, she’s done so well on her album and I’m like ‘You’re supposed to do well, you know, good, good! It should be, you know?’”

As well as breaking America, another platform where Estelle pops her collar as a trailblazer is fashion – especially in increasingly image-conscious music industry where artists are vying to push the fashion boat further out. “I think I kind of started that fashion mood. You know, we came out three years ago when I was in ‘American Boy’ and we were in shoulder pads when everyone was in pretty dresses. I may be too far ahead of myself, but I just know: When I wear my clothes, a year later I’m guaranteed to see somebody else in something similar.”

While she has made Brooklyn home for the last three years, Estelle credits her hometown for her unique sense of style: “Part of coming from London, you know, we knew Isabella Blow, and we knew Daphne Guinness and all these ladies that set the style trend. That’s what we grew up on, you know, that’s what we do. I walked out there like, ‘I’m not wearing these little flimsy dresses, they suck! Grace Jones is my girl, I wanna wear a bustier and I want it to be tits up to here and I want my waist skinnier...’ So I never felt that pressure, I just do what I do.”

This is not the only time during our chat Estelle speaks proudly of -er- her assets... "My tits are in good stead still," she laughs, then motions towards her midriff. "You know, nothing's wrong down here," caresses her arms. "I love this, this is a blessing. There's not a single mark on it, you know, it's not too stretched out! We're alright..." and concludes, "Everything's working. You know, I hate my feet but who doesn't hate a part of their body? I'm so comfortable and happy in my skin at this point and that's what my style's reflecting. Bianca Jagger in the Seventies, Iman in the Seventies; that's where I'm taking all my style keys from - 'womanly', you know?"

In terms of style, sophistication and sass, it seems, we have three eras of Estelle - the pre-Shine Estelle in her 'Bo-Boy' (her words, not ours) ruggedness, the Shine era Estelle growing into her own and the post-Shine Estelle who tells the world, "I'm gonna show it off, and I'm gonna do it classy and I'm gonna look like a woman, like a lady." The combined result? Estelle 2.0 who promises to share herself with us with her third album due for release this autumn.

"All of Me is my most painful - er, let me not start with the word 'painful' - it is my most intimate, damn uncomfortably intimate piece of work ever," Estelle says and

continues, "It's just me. It's literally 'I went through this today and I'm still crying about it but I'm going to write about it. I went through that today and I'm happy and I'm going to write about it.' And this feels weird - writing all the songs I wrote, it was just like I knew it had a direct feeling of 'Oh God, this is weird; they may find that I'm writing about them' but I pushed through it, and the feeling afterwards was such clarity, such joy!"

There were also moments of unprecedented fun, it seems, made more fun by Estelle's quirky retelling - like the 'Break My Heart' video shoot filmed at a Malibu beach house.

"We were standing on the edge of the pool and there was a space about two-foot long and about a foot wide, so you could imagine me in these sky-high Charlotte Olympia heels," Estelle begins, laughing, "and you've got me and Rick Ross, standing very close to each other and they're like, 'Dance, move!' and I'm like 'I'ma bust my ass down this hill if I move or dance. I will not move my legs. I will walk out here, you're not gonna carry me out here on a stretcher! It was one of these moments that would never happen again. It was one of those, like, pure magic moments. It just felt so amazing just to have that moment and I get to live this as my career!"

While Estelle is keen to point out that *All of Me* is more about "personal growth" than relationships, she admits that "Break My Heart" is about a certain 'American boy'.

"Break My Heart" was about somebody I was with until recently. When we got together, I was like 'I don't trust you. No, dude, you've not given me a reason to trust anything, don't break my heart though 'cause I want to trust you.' It was being that vulnerable and that girly that scared the hell out of me. I had the guts to say that to him. I feel like a lot of people don't quite know how to articulate that. Our job as songwriters and singers is to articulate that, be able to give that to people to be able to play."

With that Estelle moves on to her love-at-first-hearing story of "Thank You", "I heard it and my heart just started beating real fast. I was like, 'There's something with this record, I just feel this.' The song's talking about 'Thank you for making me a woman,'" she says before breaking into an impromptu rendition of the chorus.

"It's just a certain level of human vulnerability that comes with that record, that everybody's been through. That's the point of this record; it's so uncomfortable for me to feel that way, because I've

just started feeling cool with feeling that way, cool with being a girl, cool with crying, cool with listening to others on a level like, I might be wrong, let me shut up. The shit's uncomfortable but the stretching is growing me as a human and the stuff that we need to know, I'd rather have learnt it in my twenties but I'm 31 now, at least I'm learning it now, not in my forties or my fifties. You know, I have people in my life that are older now that I know would have valued it earlier on. And I think that's what we want - to just be as far advanced as early as possible. So that's "Thank You." I love it."

"As far advanced as possible" is where Estelle wants to be right now. From a council flat to living it up at the Hamptons and jetting to all corners of the world, but more importantly, at peace in her own skin. Does she still pinch herself?

"I stopped pinching myself!" she shoots back, "I'm blessed, thank God. I feel like every time I had to pinch myself, it was like me trying to pull myself back down to the ground and it was like a slap in God's face when He's trying to elevate me. I'm just rolling with it. Thank you, thank you, thank you." **FAB**

# FABQS

by Juliana Oliveira

## FAB album of the year so far?

Stone Rollin' by Raphael Saadiq. Beautiful album!

## FAB book?

Bitch is the New Black by Helena Andrews. Her Mum's a lesbian and she's had the most varied upbringing I've ever read about in my life. She's hilarious.

## FAB city to play in?

My FAB city to play in where I get the most love is always London.

## FAB power dress/accessory?

I like a good ring. People look at your hands and your feet, first. I've always got good shoes, but I love a good ring.

## FAB designer?

My favourite, 'cause she's been dressing me recently and I think she does really good womanly clothing. DVF - Diane von Furstenberg. She's the truth!

## FAB way to spend a day in New York?

FAB way to spend a day in New York is on top of a rooftop of a hotel or something like that - it's always good. There are so many new hotels opening

up, from the Dream to the old standard Soho House. Rooftops, by the pool, chilling with some friends and some alcohol.

## FAB thing about your job?

The FAB thing about my job is I have a job. How about that?

## FAB highlight of your career so far?

I went to Capri, the year before last between Christmas and New Year's. We danced on tables, we drank wine all day. It was in Capri at Christmas, it was like, "This is just the fabulous life, it

felt like diamonds were falling out the sky." I loved it.

## FAB thing about having African descent?

The FAB thing about having an African descent is that I was brought up with a certain level of class that is non-existent in other cultures. You know, African parents would tell you to "sit with your legs together," "close your mouth" - you are who the hell you are and who you were brought up to be. Be that, live it and anyone that can't take your shine, they don't deserve to be around you.



VOL 2 ISSUE 3 2011

MAGAZINE

Fabulous. African. Black.

£3.75 • N1000 • GH¢10.0

Autumn  
Trends in  
**Focus**

The Art of  
**POWER**  
DRESSING

# Soul Sisters

Estelle, Lira, Liz Ogumbo

+ **Empowering Africa:**  
Anna Gataneh, Tamzin Lejeune, SCHEFO



# THE **POWER** ISSUE