

PHOTOGRAPHS ROBIN HARPER

'GETTING OLDER IS NOTHING TO APOLOGISE FOR'

Jessie Ware's brazen honesty – poured into her music – has earned her fans all around the world. And having a daughter hasn't changed any of that, or her endless ambition, finds *Eve Barlow*

WHENEVER JESSIE WARE is in LA she stays at Benny Blanco's house. Benny is one of the world's top pop producers (he's worked with Justin Bieber and

Maroon 5 among others), but to Jessie, he's 'a brother'. 'I benefit far more from this relationship than Benny does,' she jokes, as he passes through the kitchen offering to pick up snacks.

Jessie, 33, is slumped on the couch with her one-year-old daughter while her husband, Sam, a personal trainer, is by the pool house. The baby, who must remain nameless, laughs. 'I wish you were this cute when you wake me at fucking five in the

morning!' says Jessie, before handing her to Sam. 'It's an operation every day. We don't do "I love you" to each other any more...' She pauses to speak to Sam: 'Shall I give her the cottage pie again?' Sam OKs that suggestion. Jessie turns back to me. 'See?'

It's not even a month since Jessie's third album *Glasshouse* was released and already she's toured the UK, mainland Europe and both coasts of America. She's also just put out a podcast, *Table Manners*, with her mother Helena. Today, she's multitasking, getting up mid-interview to 'have a piss', reaching into the cupboard for cracker-based fuel, losing her train of thought. As she sits back down, apologising for the umpteenth time, I say, 'Jessie, you're doing amazingly.' She

Recording, touring, being a hands-on mum – Jessie does it all

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Holland last month



I WANT MORE PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT THE MUSIC

brightens. 'That's all I needed to hear. What was your question again? What's been my biggest growth on this record? My fat arse, babe. Cos I had a fucking baby.'

Brazen honesty is part and parcel of Jessie these days. When asked how this is all working, she says, 'I mean it's just not. But it will!' It was a 'romantic idea' that Jessie, Sam and their daughter could travel the world as a family without help. But without a nanny ('I'm not earning any money yet'), they need more hands on deck. 'She's wonderful,' she says of her daughter. 'But it's hard. I'm exhausted. We've all had the stomach bug. We were in hospital with her the night before we flew to America. I was vomiting before the San Francisco show. There's no possibility to fucking rest. I'm on the biggest adrenalin comedown from being a new mum, writing a new record, promoting it, to now feeling dead. It's fine, but it's eye-opening.' Then she pauses and lowers to a whisper. 'I don't know why I have to utter it under my breath but I'm ambitious. I care about my career and I knew I had to work. And yet I had a baby! I don't know why I fucking did but I did it. I'm not gonna fall now.'

Did she have anyone in the music world to look to for advice? 'Well, I don't know Sade or Annie Lennox...' she says. Then she pipes up, 'Annie Mac! She's the one. I asked her if I should get pregnant and she went, "Fucking do it, don't fucking wait. You'll work it out and you'll be more successful."' As with everything the Radio 1 DJ rubber-stamps, she was right. The critical response to *Glasshouse* has been brilliant, the shows have been packed, and offers are hurtling towards Jessie. But it took a while to get to this point.

The story goes that after Jessie finished touring her second album, 2014's *Tough Love*, she felt she needed to rush a follow-up before starting her family. She thought that if she took time out people would lose interest. She showed Benny the hits-chasing material she'd worked on in a hurry. He bluntly told her it wasn't good enough. He couldn't understand why she'd stray from what she'd already built, which was far cooler and more sophisticated. 'That reminded me of my sense of self,' she says. 'I don't really know why I do this, it's fucking mental, but it was a relief because I didn't believe in

those songs either. That released me back into creativity.'

She went into sessions just after giving birth and, she says, something finally clicked: she knew what she wanted to do. That old material was shelved and, for *Glasshouse*, Jessie worked with more collaborators than ever – a stellar class including Ed Sheeran, hit songwriter Julia Michaels and pop phenomenon Francis & The Lights. Something changed in her confidence, rendering her more assertive as a songwriter. 'Motherhood was essential to that. It gave me such focus,' she says. 'If I'm gonna be away from [my baby] I would make sure it was gonna work. I knew what I wanted to do more than ever. There was this decisiveness. Like, "Cool, I've decided to have a child while making my third record, I'm nowhere near as successful as I could be, I haven't achieved what I want to achieve – whatever that is..."'

Jessie struggles to put her finger on what her goals are. 'I'm still this secret that's shared,' she says. You have to ask yourself why a powerhouse vocalist with mainstream pop songs doesn't have the popularity of Sheeran himself, or perhaps Adele. Jessie was always the indie darling, coming up as a featured artist for the likes of Disclosure and Sampha. It's taken longer for her to grow as a songwriter. 'I was

petrified for the majority,' she says. 'I felt like I was getting away with it.' Without wanting to sound 'cocky', Jessie's aware that *Glasshouse* has the most commercial potential of any of her albums. 'I'd like to play to bigger rooms, if I can,' she says. 'I want more people to know about the music. But something hasn't crossed over. I don't know what that is. Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the problem.'

This kind of self-deprecating searching has been a major theme for *Glasshouse*. The songs have become very personal. *Thinking About You* is about the guilt of spending time apart from her then five-month-old. 'There's something heartbreaking about that song,' she says. *First Time* is about the unique struggles of her relationship with a husband who's been with her since they were teenagers. 'That song feels like frustration,' she says.

Sam, a song she wrote with Sheeran, is her barest yet. She was pregnant when she wrote it. The lyric goes, *And I hope I'm as brave as my mother... I hope she knows that I found a man far from my father/Sam, my baby, and me*. Her dad – John Ware – a BBC *Panorama* reporter, was divorced from her mother when Jessie was 10. 'He's not a terrible person, he just let us down,' she says. 'I haven't gone there before. It took Ed Sheeran to fucking tell me to do it. I negotiated with him then thought, "Why am I scared of this? I should just fucking commit."'

Has she spoken to her dad about that song yet? 'He's really pissed off,' she admits. 'He's hurt and I understand. I hid my head in the sand. I was a coward. I avoided him coming to my shows, didn't tell him about the album coming out.'

Despite the rapturous reception to *Sam*, a song she leaves until the end of her set, Jessie isn't convinced that more truth-telling is the way to go for her future recording career. 'I almost wanna go and make a frickin' disco record next, one that doesn't talk about me at all,' she says. 'This time I wanted women to see that you can do it. Not that I'm doing anything particularly revolutionary or radical, but I wanted to prove to men that I'm not going away, that getting older and having a baby isn't something to apologise for. Is that OK?'

More than, Jessie.