



ANATOMY OF A SONG

# Bebe's Kids

At 28, she's one of pop's most in-demand songwriters (penning hits for Selena Gomez and Nick Jonas, among others) and a pop star in her own right (with Florida Georgia Line crossover "Meant to Be"). Ahead of her debut LP, *Expectations* (out June 22), **Bebe Rexha** shares some of her music-making secrets with EW. **BY EVE BARLOW**

## DON'T OVERTHINK IT

"I'm a control freak," she says. "But there's no controlling anything, especially in art." For Rexha, that means trusting your gut. Take "Meant to Be." She wasn't into it the day she wrote it, but changed her mind the next morning—and had to convince

her producers not to over-egg the final version. "It needed to be stripped back," she says. "Making it this big record would have ruined it." That's her approach to cutting vocals, too. Rexha only ever works with a first take. "I don't care how bad a recording is, I refuse to go into

the booth again. It's about feel, not mathematics."

## BATHS ARE INSPIRING

"I take a lot of baths," says Rexha, laughing. She came up with most of *Expectations* in the tub, including the piano-led track "Grace." "I was sitting under the

running water, thinking, 'There's no easy way to break his heart, I could fly him to Paris and do it on top of the Eiffel Tower, but he's still gonna hate me no matter what.'" She immediately grabbed her phone. "It was soaking!"

## FIND YOUR EXECUTIONERS

"It's very hard to find finishers," says Rexha (she means engineers, not assassins). "The songs always come fast, but sometimes the execution kills them." Not so with "Grace," which started out on vocoder with no piano. "I was over that song. I hated it." But behind Rexha's back, the producer changed the treatment, and it became so central to the record.

## BE VULNERABLE

Album cut "I'm a Mess" came during her first encounter with songwriter Justin Tranter. "I walked in f---ed-up, crying, mascara running: 'I'm sorry I'm late. I'm a mess.' Justin said, 'Sit down. That's the song title.'" A few tokes of weed later and they'd written a smash about owning your insecurities. "I said, 'I'm a loser.' Justin goes, 'Amazing! Tell me all the bad things you feel about yourself.'"

## DON'T BOOK A BIG NAME FOR THE SAKE OF IT

Rexha's album has features from Quavo and Tory Lanez. Contributions from more famous artists weren't working for her, so she dumped them. "I've had verses from so many other massive names who have cut songs on this album, and I'm like, 'No.' Sometimes it doesn't feel right."

## NEVER WRITE WITH ANYONE IN MIND

Rexha takes the same approach to a song, whether it's for herself or someone else. "If you're trying to write a song for Britney, you'll try to rewrite 'Toxic.' Britney doesn't want 'Toxic.' Why would you copy an iconic song?" After the song's written, however, sometimes you just know who it's for. When she wrote "The Monster" as an unknown, she called it right away: Eminem. "My people were like, 'You're crazy.' I said, 'I swear on my grandfather who died from cancer.'"

# CAPTAIN FANTASTIC

When you've been a small-time drug hustler, experienced a brush with death, a false start as a major label artist, and life as a busker, you're well-positioned to sing the blues—as **Fantastic Negrito** (real name: Xavier Dphrepaulezz) does on his incendiary, consciousness-raising new album, *Please Don't Be Dead* (out now). He gives EW the details. **BY SARAH RODMAN**

## ON HOW HE USES DIFFERENT VOCAL STYLES TO EFFORTLESSLY SURF BETWEEN BLUES, HARD ROCK, FUNK, AND R&B:

I hate boxes and labels. So I'm just able to create freely and use my voice as a tool. I don't really think about it. I try to be authentic. I'm not really a great singer, I'm just more of a guy with voices. And that's okay.

## ON HOW THE SONGS ON PLEASE DON'T BE DEAD CAME TOGETHER:

I like to keep it very organic. I got the idea from touring in Europe, because people were so freaked out about America. They kept asking me, "What's going on in America?" So it led me to reflect, "Hey, what's going on in America?"

## ON WHY HE HAS AN OBLIGATION TO COMMENT ON THE WORLD AROUND HIM:

I fear for the lives of my children, and I felt compelled

to do something for them. I need to equip them with the tools to deal with a very aggressive police state that is in fear of brown and black people. And now schools get shot up, and it's just the reality of living in America. So I make my music for my kids.

## ON THE PERSONAL VS. THE POLITICAL IN HIS MUSIC:

I don't ever think I'm writing political music at all. Politicians, they don't really tell the truth because people own them. I don't know if artists or comedians are really political, we're just more like, "Hey, this is going on. And it's funny or it's interesting or it's good or it's bad."

## ON TACKLING HARD-SHIPS BUT REMAINING HOPEFUL IN HIS MUSIC AND LIFE:

I think all my music is very optimistic. On the first

record I was telling people "Hey, this is out there, do you see it?" Maybe on this record I may be willing to fight a little bit, that's why it's a little bit more aggressive. I use the universal guitar riffs. I'd like to get people together—all people like good guitar riffs; everybody likes "Johnny B. Goode." To me, black roots music is for everyone. It's the music of our country and the world. Everywhere I go, people play their version of black music.

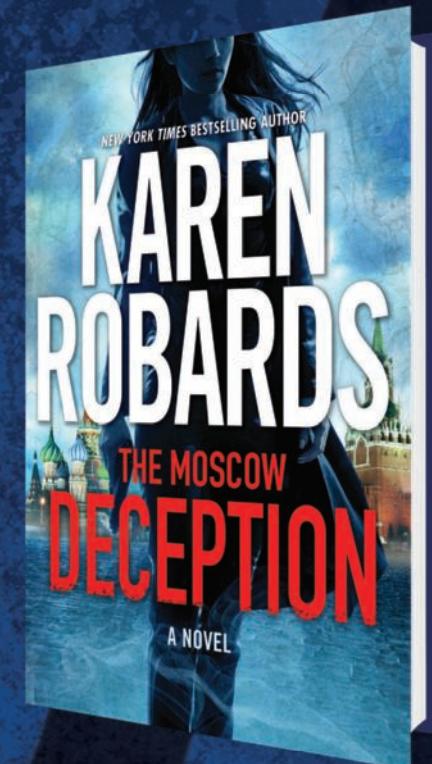
## ON WHETHER HE WAS CONFIDENT SUCCESS WOULD COME:

I wasn't really looking for anything. I just wanted to get out on the street and play. I didn't want to go out and try to win a Grammy, it just happened. I'm not looking for anything but just making music and connecting with this thing called life.

REXHA: SASHA SAMSONOVA; FANTASTIC NEGrito: DEANDRA FORKS



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