

BROOKE CANDY

In all likelihood, your first glimpse of rapper/singer Brooke Candy is the eye-popping video for her debut single “Opulence,” which involves Candy wearing a face full of glitter and a gold grill and “doing grown things,” as she puts it in the song. Candy came up with the concept with Nicola Formichetti, Italian fashion label Diesel’s new artistic director, who calls Candy his “muse.” It was directed by boundary-pushing photographer Steven Klein, known for his ad campaigns for Calvin Klein and Alexander McQueen, among others. “I knew I wanted to make art,” Candy says. “I didn’t know I was going to be able to make art like this.” The only artists Klein has shot music videos for are Madonna and Lady Gaga.

Like those chameleonic women, Candy is fearless, irreverent, and restlessly creative. Covered in tattoos (including the words “SELF” and “MADE” on her wrists) and sporting two hoops in her nose, she is a petite force of nature who can assume various forms. One minute, she’s a badass, streetwise rapper walking a toddler on a leash and dancing on top of a limo in a robot outfit (as she did in her 2012 “Das Me” video, which is how Formichetti discovered her), the next she’s a glam warrior posing for edgy photo shoots for *V* and *Galore* magazine and closing her performance in Diesel’s spring fashion show in Venice by demonically shouting her single’s last line “I own everything, baby!” at the assembled bigwigs and one percenters. Both personas feel authentic, because Candy *is* both of those things. She is also born to be a pop star. *Creem* has called her “a retro-futuristic vixen with a tongue as sharp as her hooks.”

Singer and songwriter Sia (who has penned hits for Rihanna, Katy Perry, and Beyoncé, among others) clearly agrees. After coming across Candy’s Instagram in 2013, Sia contacted her and signed on to executive produce Candy’s debut five-song EP as well as her upcoming album for RCA Records, which features production from Greg Kurstin, Diplo, Benny Blanco, and will.i.am. Sia told *Paper* magazine that when will.i.am saw Candy’s videos he said, “Can I work with her tomorrow?” Candy reminded Sia of herself. “We met at a Coffee Bean and I told her all the things I had been through,” Candy recalls. “And she was like, ‘I made all these mistakes and I will not let you make the same ones.’ By the end of the meeting, she said she’d do everything she could to help me. It started off with a song and it progressed to finding me a manager and taking over my album. She said, ‘I’m not going to let anyone f**k with you. Because I can see your heart.’”

Candy makes a formidable first impression on her debut EP, which showcases her rapid-fire rhymes and multi-layered lyrics. Though her music has genuine swagger, it is also deftly ironic. Candy herself did not grow up with luxury. Her parents split when she was eight, and Candy lived in an apartment with her mother in the bland, but affluent Los Angeles suburb of Agoura Hills. “My dad worked in business and my mom was a nurse, so I didn’t have as much as the

other kids,” she says. “I was bullied intensely. My classmates got Escalades for their 16th birthday. I didn't even have a car. I always felt different and I always wanted to express the fact that I felt different.”

Candy channels that outsider feeling into her music. “Opulence,” is not only the title of her single, it's also her wellspring of inspiration (she has the word tattooed on her neck), which she says sprung from multiple viewings of the documentary *Paris Is Burning*. The 1990 film chronicles the community of black, Latino, gay, and transgendered people who converged upon New York City's underground drag balls in the '80s and expressed their identities with over-the-top costumes and styles of dance.

“I could relate to it on so many different levels,” Candy says. “I had an epiphany when the host announced the category Opulence. He said, ‘*You own everything.*’ Now this is queer culture in the '80s in New York; not the safest place to be if you're gay and flamboyant and out, but in those rooms, these people were safe. This is where they went to be free. In that moment, they had all this power and I connected with it so much. At the time, my mom had found out that I liked girls and kicked me out. I was living in my car and stripping at the Seventh Veil in Hollywood to support myself, spending 12 hours a day braiding my hair and doing whatever I had to do to get a crazy outfit made for Mustache Mondays, which was an underground gay club night I used to go to. I would strut around in the same way and get the same attention. It was the only place I felt like the other things in my life didn't matter. I was finally home.”

Candy's goal is to recapture those powerful feelings in her songs, including “Godzillionaire” and “Feel Yourself (Alcohol)” from her EP. “They all have the same idea,” she says. “Two years ago, I was in a dark place. I want to empower the person I was before I learned how to express myself and help others do the same. I want to provoke something inside of them. But mainly, I want them to feel tough. I want them to feel like they can take on whatever they have to do with ease and poise and edge.”

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