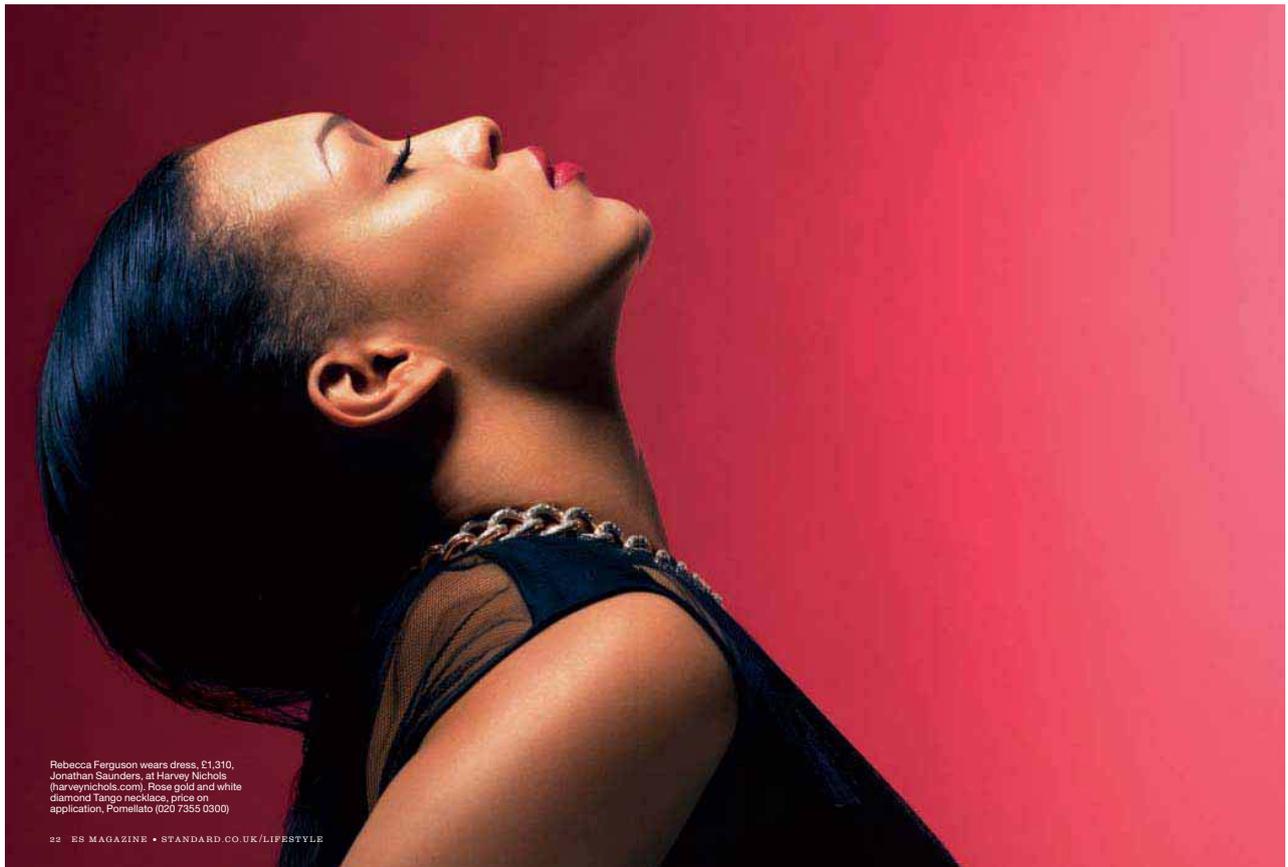


# The real thing

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ANDREA CARTER-BOWMAN**  
STYLED BY **NICKY YATES**

When *X Factor* runner-up Rebecca Ferguson released her debut album, no one was holding their breath. But the single mother from Liverpool confounded the critics – and her record label – with her soulful, self-penned record, *Heaven*. By **Richard Godwin**



Rebecca Ferguson wears dress, £1,310, Jonathan Saunders, at Harvey Nichols (harveynichols.com). Rose gold and white diamond Tango necklace, price on application, Pomellato (020 7355 0300)

22 ES MAGAZINE • STANDARD.CO.UK/LIFESTYLE



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Simon Cowell unveiled *The X Factor* in 2004. Since then, it has helped to sell 40 million records in the UK alone. Cowell has launched the careers of a huge number of artists, ranging from the respectable (Leona Lewis) to the regrettable (One Direction), the invisible (Shayne Ward) to the risible (Jedward). *X Factor* artists have been responsible for 77 UK top ten singles and 27 number one albums. If all the contestants were laid end to end, they would cover the entire Northern Line. If you attached dynamos to their vocal chords, their singing alone would be enough to power it.

The most remarkable fact is this, however, and it's not even made up. It took *The X Factor* eight years to produce an album worth listening to twice. You'd think the 1,000 monkeys with 1,000 typewriters rule would have kicked in sooner, but never mind. It's finally happened, and it seems a landmark worth celebrating.

*Heaven*, by the 2010 runner-up Rebecca Ferguson, was released late last year and, by common consensus, is really good. Matt Cardle, who ultimately defeated Ferguson in the final, has nothing on this. A modern soul record in the vein of Adele's *21*, it actually feels like it has been made by a human being. After receiving positive reviews ('There's nothing I don't like about this record,' cooed *The Daily Telegraph*), it has now sold close to half a million copies, making the 25-year-old single mother from Liverpool the best-selling female debutante of 2011. Even Ferguson herself seems surprised at

how well it has performed. 'It's done brilliant, 'ain't it?' she squeaks in a Scouse accent so thick you could plaster a wall with it. 'I was so shocked, like, 'cos I was so nervous before! But it's been luvvly.'

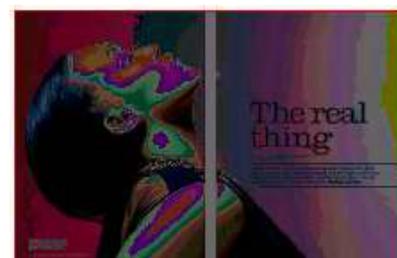
We meet in the futuristic offices of Sony, where Ferguson is adjusting to her success. After years spent bringing up her two children, Lillie May, seven, and Karl, five, on a secretary's salary, she is enjoying not worrying about money any more. 'That's the worrying thing though, not worrying,' she laughs.

She has treated herself to a pair of Christian Louboutins. 'They're killing me actually. But God, he's done well, 'ain't he?' she says of the French shoe designer. 'They're so expensive!' Her simple get-up, jeans and black top, suggests she hasn't been overly extravagant, however - though she has relocated to Surrey with her children.

Ferguson is friendly and open, but still bears the reality show training, smiling obligingly after each succinct answer. She deals professionally with my questions about her brief fling with Zayn Malik from *X Factor* boy band One Direction. Malik is six years younger than Ferguson; the tabloids dubbed her the 'older woman'. 'Yeah, I did get a bit of stick for that!' she cackles, before telling me it was merely the product of *The X Factor* hothouse and has all ended amicably. 'It's something that I look back on and I don't regret. When I'm 70, I'll look back and say "That's life".' She doesn't keep in touch with him. 'When a relationship's over, when it's done, it's done. It's over, move on. Next!' She remains single and admits she has barely had time for romance since *X Factor*.

Clearly, *Heaven* was a labour of love in itself - though the way she describes it, its success was never a sure thing. Like most *X Factor* finalists, Ferguson won a record contract with Simon Cowell's Syco label (in conjunction with Epic) after she finished the show. When it came to deciding how the album would sound, Ferguson did what few contestants would and put her foot down, insisting that she write her own material. 'We're not soft, we're very streetwise, Scousers,' she says. 'People didn't realise that when I was on *X Factor*. I'm quiet, I'm quite shy at times - but I'm not soft.'

Eventually, she says, the label backed off and agreed to let madam have her way. She was teamed with the songwriter Eg White (author of Adele's 'Chasing Pavements' and Will Young's 'Leave Right Now') and they clicked right away. The first song they wrote together was the single 'Nothing's Real But Love', a soaring soul number that finds a moment of all-encompassing emotion in a supermarket queue. You can sense a lot of lived experience behind it, I tell her. 'I was feeling quite angry at the time, quite emotional,' Ferguson explains. 'I'd just come off *The X Factor* and everyone was assuming that



I had everything, like, “You’ve got money now, you’re gonna be this big thing,” but I remember thinking: “You know what makes me happy? My kids, my family, my best friends.”

It set the tone for the album – a soaring collection of soul that even impressed Simon Cowell. ‘I am absolutely blown away by [Rebecca], her album and by her performance. Congratulations!’ he tweeted. It was the culmination of a long-held dream for Ferguson, who had been writing songs since she was ‘like, tiny’. In fact, a crude rhyme that she invented at school became a playground standard, she tells me, though disappointingly, she won’t tell me how it went. ‘It’s proper cringey.’

Ferguson’s parents split up when she was three, and she and her two brothers were brought up in working-class Anfield by her mother, who suffered from depression. It was clearly a burden on the

young Rebecca, who says she became wiser and more observant as a result. But while she took on a lot of responsibility from a young age, she also became a self-confessed daydreamer. ‘I’d just go up to my room, listen to all these tapes over and over: Whitney Houston, Cher, Kylie...’ To this day, she knows every word from the Bette Midler musical comedy *Beaches* – the film that gave us ‘Wind Beneath My Wings’ – also about a wannabe singer. She began to push herself to follow in those footsteps. ‘My family always believed in me, but it wasn’t like a stage school family. I didn’t have that mum driving me places, I was always on the bus getting there myself, paying for my own singing lessons...’

She had a little local success singing in clubs, but just as she was about to put her dreams into action, she became pregnant at 17. ‘I was planning on getting the next train and moving up to London, to audition for the West End. I had all these dreams, and then I found out I was having Lillie and that kind of made me think... “Oh God, I can’t now.” I actually thought I couldn’t sing again, which is sad, really.’

Though she split up with the children’s father,

‘I was feeling quite angry and emotional when I came off *The X Factor*. Everyone was assuming that I had everything’

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REBECCA  
FERGUSON

Rebecca wears top, £528, bra £176, and skirt £8,700, all Dolce & Gabbana (020 7659 9000). Feather diamond ring set in white gold, £9,750, Asprey (020 7493 6767)



‘When I was asked to do something I said: “I’m from Liverpool, do you think I’m stupid? Do you honestly think I’m gonna get on stage and sing that song and humiliate myself? No!”’

Karl, a builder, he helped out both financially and with the child care. ‘He’s been really good and his family has been really supportive as well,’ she says. Still, she was forced to reconsider her priorities. ‘They are your life, your kids. I’ve just had a few days off with them, and they take up all your attention. They’re so lovely though, they’re such a blessing. Some people see it as a burden, but I think they’re just amazing. They made me realise what life was about. I was so driven, just wanting to be a singer.’

The dream then had to fit around her job as a secretary, which she says she was quite good at. She almost gave up on the idea of a singing career for good when she was 21 and went to New York to audition for P Diddy’s *Starmaker*, a short-lived reality TV show. ‘We’d all put money together, me family, me dad, me step-mum, me mum, me brothers... They were really good! ‘Cos they had this idea that I was going to meet P Diddy, so they all chipped in. And then I got there, and it was just a producer – it wasn’t what I thought it would be at all. How cruel!’

After her experience at the hands of Puff (or ‘Poof Daddy as Rebecca calls him) I wonder if she wasn’t worried about going on *X Factor*. She sent the application off on a whim, forgot about it and got a pleasant surprise when she had an email back telling her she had been accepted. ‘I went... oh, I might as well.’ Wasn’t she worried about being humiliated? ‘Cor! That was my worst fear! Me being on the show... and failing. It was a risk that I took.’ I wonder if she thinks that the show exploits people in her position. ‘Do you know what? I used to have strong feelings,’ she begins – but clearly those feelings have abated. ‘No one can force you to do anything on the show. When you’re getting outtakes of people humiliating themselves, they humiliated themselves. I’m not saying the comments that they get are fair...’

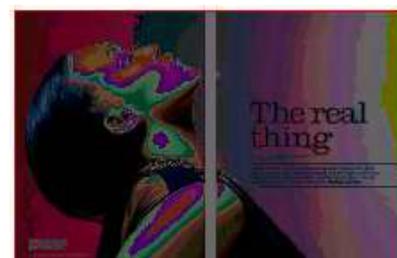
She managed to survive as she knew how to handle herself, she says – part of her streetwise training. ‘When I was asked to do something I said: “I’m from Liverpool, do you think I’m stupid? Do you honestly think I’m gonna get on that stage and sing that song and humiliate myself? No!” And they listened to me.’ The most ridiculous thing they tried to get her to sing was ‘The Müller yoghurt song,’ she says, with a look of incredulity. ‘Y’know, “Got my eyes, got my nose...”’ she sings. I realise

she means ‘Ain’t Got No, I’ve Got Life’ by Nina Simone, a joyful, transcendent expression of the human spirit, which has recently been used to promote flavoured dairy products. ‘The Müller yoghurt advert was huge at the time, so I just put me foot down and said, “No, not a chance.” I ended up singing ‘Sweet Dreams.’

Does she think Simon Cowell has had a positive influence on music? ‘There’s so many mixed opinions on Simon, but he has opened doors for people. Like Andy Abraham’ – the bin man who was runner up in series two – ‘He was a certain age and he’d always sang in clubs and he’d never really got a shot. *The X Factor* does give people an opportunity.’ That it does. And in the case of Ferguson, even a hardened cynic would find it hard to begrudge her that opportunity. Next up, it’s a tour of theatres – she’ll be

nipping back home to Surrey to see the kids between shows – and then who knows? Adele didn’t do too badly with an album of heartfelt modern soul last year. ‘I do things that I believe in,’ she says. ‘I never want to do something that I regret and then have to blame someone else for. If I sing a song, I want to believe in it.’ She looks up. ‘Do you know what I mean?’ **ES**  
*Rebecca Ferguson’s new single ‘Too Good to Lose’ is out on 4 March. She plays the Theatre Royal Drury Lane on 13 March (rebeccaofficial.com)*

With her mentor Cheryl Cole on *The X Factor* in 2010





Rebecca wears jumpsuit, £950, 3.1 Phillip Lim, at brownsfashion.com. Shoes, £475, Christian Louboutin (020 7491 0033). Knap sofa bed, £1,395, Per Weiss, at heals.co.uk

STYLIST'S ASSISTANTS: GRACE SMITHAM AND LAUREN SEGAL; HAIR BY KEICHIRO HIRANO AT DW MANAGEMENT USING BUMBLE AND BUMBLE; MAKE-UP BY CASSIE LOMAS AT PHAMOUS ARTISTS USING BOURJOIS; LOCATION: THE LANTERN STUDIOS (LANTERNSTUDIOS.COM); REX FEATURES

