Kelly Clarkson stuck to her guns for her new album. She may have misfired – The Boston Globe

Her independent tep went a little too far

By Joan Anderman, Globe Staff  |  June 19, 2007

Kelly Clarkson's current career meltdown is a study in the tricky politics of the music business. On one side of the aisle: a young singing star who wants to take the artistic reins from her seasoned handler. On the other side: the seasoned handler, Sony BMG chief Clive Davis, who wants his cash cow to keep cranking out the hits.

The knee-jerk response: damn the suit, who values profit over art and would keep a budding songstress down in order to keep his revenue stream flowing.

But it's more complicated than that.

Here's the back story: Clarkson, a terrific pop singer, won the first season of "America Idol" and went on to release two massively successful albums, 2003's "Thankful" and 2004's "Breakaway." Now 25, Clarkson wanted her next album to be more personal, to reflect her experiences and sensibilities, and she decided not to work with the professional songwriters and producers who had previously supplied her with infectious anthems.

That's where the trouble began. When Clarkson turned in the album, for which she had written or co-written every song, Davis didn't hear a single. It's been widely reported that Davis offered Clarkson $10 million to toss five tracks and replace them with songs he would handpick for her. She declined. (Eleven million earns a girl a modicum of power.) It looked like Clarkson had scored one for the little guy -- or at least the talent show contestant compelled to stake her creative claim. Not only that, Clarkson insisted that the label move the album's release date up by a month, from the originally scheduled July 24 to June 26, so that her fans would know the songs before her tour began on July 11.

But the single she chose, an unmelodic rocker called "Never Again," which was released in early May, is slipping down the pop charts.
And last week the walls started crumbling. A week ago yesterday, Clarkson fired her manager, a co-producer of her album. Three days later her tour was canceled due to poor ticket sales.

So, what if the handler is right? Much as we love to demonize the executives as the root of all evil -- corporate henchmen who rip off the talent and the fans -- some of them are real music people. Davis is one of them. A 40-year industry veteran, he's guided of some of music's premier artists: Janis Joplin, Santana, Pink Floyd, Bruce Springsteen, Aretha Franklin, Patti Smith, Whitney Houston, and Alicia Keys. Clarkson's first two albums were models of mainstream pop-rock -- driving and youthful but also catchy and accessible. Both were executive-produced by Davis.

Quality artistry and big sales aren't mutually exclusive; look no further than Clarkson's career so far, and Davis's track record, for proof. But Clarkson's priorities have shifted. Writing this album on the heels of a rough spell in her life that included a painful breakup, it wasn't songs or sales she was concerned with, but self-expression.

"I hope the ring you gave to her turns her finger green/ I hope when you're in bed with her you think of me," go the opening lines of "Never Again." Clarkson has clearly been boning up on her early Alanis Morissette. But truly, the song isn't such a radical departure from "Since U Been Gone" or "Miss Independent." The guitars are a little more distorted, the lyrics are a little more negative, and -- here's the kicker -- there isn't a hook. Clarkson isn't feeling very hooky, and the need to share her feelings was her guiding principle.

"That was one of the label's things. They were like, 'It's just too negative.' I'm like, 'Well, I'm sorry I've inconvenienced you with my life,' " she told Entertainment Weekly last month. "But it's reality. Some of the songs are not what 10-year-olds are probably going to listen to. . . . This record is more intense, it's more raw, it's more emotional. . . . Even if it does tank -- who cares? It's one album! Out of a whole career of albums I'm going to have."

Good for Clarkson for sticking to her guns, for staying true to herself, for answering the muse. And yes, it's just one album. But the depressing fact is that in today's music climate, one dud of an album can derail a career, especially that of a Top 40 pop queen. Clarkson is talented, but she's also relatively new. Her fan base is young and fickle. And it's hard to blame Davis for wanting -- needing -- one of the precious few artists who still sells albums to stay solvent.

Clarkson is releasing the album she wanted, and deserved, to make. It may or may not be a hit. I'm a Kelly Clarkson fan; I've listened to four of her new songs online and don't love any of them. The most depressing part of all this isn't witnessing the proverbial collision of Art and Commerce. It's admitting -- after cheering her declaration of autonomy and defending her right to self-expression -- that Clarkson may be better at singing songs than writing them. And that sometimes the pop machine works exactly the way it's supposed to.

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