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ew pop stars make you want to take care of them as much as Selena Gomez does. It's her adorable heart-shaped face, the way she sometimes tears up mid-performance, almost a decade's worth of paparazzi footage in which she's just trying to get to her car, guys, plus a tender and tumultuous young love played out in spectacular fashion at the dawn of the social media age. A beautiful baby bird caught out in a storm—or at least that's how I imagined her.

I was wrong. After talking to the 23-year-old singer, actor and Pantene ambassador, there's no doubt: Gomez is in control. With a voice that sounds as deep and rich as barrel-aged bourbon and a plucky sense of self-awareness, she tells me she's fighting hard to be seen for her accomplishments rather than for her very famous ex, whom neither of us mention by name. She also says that in the past year she signed with a new label (Interscope) and manager, wrapped five films (including *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving* with Paul Rudd and *The Big Short* with Brad Pitt) and, for the first time, executive-produced her own album, *Revival* (Universal, Oct. 9), a moody R&B- and rap-inflected pop record stacked with power collaborators like ASAP Rocky and Charli XCX, is her most spare and emotionally raw album yet. By turns unapologetic, empowered, seductive and—yes—vulnerable, it reflects, as Gomez tells me, who she is now.

You recently tweeted that you're disappointed with interviews that are basically the same as the ones that were printed when you were 16—that you wish the media would talk about who you are now. So, who are you now?

This has been a transitional season for me, personally and in my career. I had multiple revelations and big accomplishments in my life: a new label and a new team; I've been working out more and focusing on my music; and I got to do a couple of movies. I was really fighting for this transition. Then, it was frustrating to see how the media was portraying me; it was defamation of character. I'm young; I've lived my life in the public eye, and I've had to figure out how to do that. Ultimately, I am 23 and figuring out my life. I feel confident, I feel empowered, I feel in control.

You transitioned out of your Disney persona a couple of years ago with *Spring Breakers*. Do you still feel like it's hard to bring the public around to understanding you're an adult artist now?

I think people are growing up with me, actually. Obviously, there are moments when people see me do something different and they're just not used to it but, ultimately, I'm not 16 anymore. I'm a young woman, and I'm growing up and trying to do it in a way I feel comfortable with.

It sounds like you really took charge of your life this year.

What were some of the decisions you made?

I just signed to Interscope Records. [Gomez recently ended a seven-year contract with Hollywood Records, the pop division of Disney Music Group.] And there was this moment when we were in the studio for a few months, and everyone felt really great about the songs, but I just didn't feel right—

I didn't think I had found the heart of the album. So I asked if I could executive-produce it, and I didn't know what they were going to say, but they liked the direction of the music and trusted me. That was a big deal, because they were partnering with me as opposed to trying to mould me or shape me into something. Now that the record's done, I look at it and I'm excited that it was all me. It was all my choice.

What was your vision for *Revival*?

I wanted to make an album—I didn't want to make just a million singles—and I wanted it to be rich with emotion. The titles of the songs speak to where I am in my life: One is called "Kill Em With Kindness"; another one is called "Rise," which is about life, about everything I've been through; another one is called "Survivors." And the album title came out of a moment I had in Mexico. I had taken a few of the producers there because I wanted to remove everybody from their environment in L.A. While we were away, I was getting criticized [by the media] because I had gained weight. I was really bummed when I found out all that stuff was going on, and that's when I was like, "I'm so tired of feeling like I'm being pulled down by something." "Revival" is the first song on the album, and the first lines are, "I feel like I've awakened—the chains around me are finally breaking."

I previewed some of the songs yesterday, and I noticed there's a real balance of strength and vulnerability.

That means so much to me. I'm not the best singer—like, I know I'm not Céline Dion. Ever since I was 16, I've had this lower register, what I thought was a very manly voice, and I was insecure about that. But once I started acting more, I realized it was an asset, and I didn't want to force myself to aim for the highest note possible. My strength is translating emotion, because I'm such a feeler. I've felt so much in the past two years, from being super in love and then dealing with things to getting older and all these beautiful experiences that were complicated and exciting. That's what I wanted the record to feel like.

The video for "Good for You" is definitely sexy, and the album cover is, too. [In the video, Gomez writhes around on various surfaces, first in a silk robe, then in an oversized tee sans pants and then in the shower, shot from the shoulders up. It's all very lusty, but tasteful.] Is that something that comes naturally to you, or does it push you outside your comfort zone?

I have my own definition of what I think is beautiful and sexy. That's why, in the video, I didn't wear lingerie and I didn't have a guy in it. It's a woman in one of those raw, bare moments; she's vulnerable, and that's sexy. I'm inspired by women who are ➤

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