

## ALEXANDRA BURKE

# You don't know how strong you are until it's put to the test

The loss of her mum followed by her boyfriend's cancer diagnosis pushed the singer to breaking point. She tells **HANNAH BRITT** how she coped

**S**HE won over the public with her incredible vocals and bubbly personality to take the X Factor crown, before wowing viewers on Strictly Come Dancing.

And now, with the starring role in *The Bodyguard* under her belt and the upcoming lead in *My Best Friend's Wedding The Musical*, Alexandra Burke has cemented her position as a key player in the West End too.

On paper Alexandra seems to have it all. But as we sit down to chat in a quiet corner of London's Soho, the 31-year-old admits that the past couple of years have been the worst of her life.

In August 2017 she lost her mum, Melissa Bell, at just 53 after a long battle with kidney failure. Then in 2019 she lost her aunt and uncle.

And in a further blow, last August her boyfriend, Hull City footballer Angus MacDonald, 27, was diagnosed with bowel cancer. Thankfully, he was given the all-clear in December last year.

"The past three years have been tough, personally and professionally," she admits.

She was very close to her mum. They cried together when she performed with pop megastar Beyoncé in front of 12 million viewers to win X Factor in 2008.

"It still makes me cry when I watch it. I lost the plot. It was amazing," she says.

"Backstage I started crying, then mum started crying, then Cheryl started crying, then Beyoncé started crying. And we're like, 'Oh God, we made Beyoncé cry'."

**A**LLEXANDRA says she's thankful for the time she and Melissa – a soul singer – had together.

"I'm grateful that I had my mum for 29 years. I've got friends who only had a year, and those who don't even remember their mums or dads. That's hard," she says.

"If anyone goes through a big loss, it puts things into perspective. I've learnt that the older I get."

Despite a busy schedule, she makes sure to cherish time with her loved ones.

"I said to my old manager the other day, 'I hope you're spending time with your mum',

because the older we get, the older they get. We don't realise that as kids, we think everyone is super-human.

"We think they can go through anything and never leave us. But the fact of the matter is, you have to remember to cherish your loved ones because you never know when their time is up."

And time spent with Angus is paramount. "We do one day a week when it's just us. It's so good for you, even if it's just a dog walk and a pub lunch."

When at her lowest ebb, she says support from family, friends, fans,

**MEMORIES:**  
The star with mum Melissa below, and Beyoncé

and even the press has helped her survive.

"I never thought I could be sitting here talking to you, or managing to get to the end of *The Bodyguard* tour. In December 2018 I said to my family 'I don't think I can go on, I think I'll give up, I can't do this.'"

"I mentally didn't think I'd have the capability to do this. But here we are," she smiles, getting visibly emotional. The support has been unbelievable. I feel very very lucky.

"I'm still working, doing what I love. I never took life for granted anyway, but I really don't now."

"I may wake up sometimes in a mood or I'm tired and I don't want to do something. But I do it. You don't realise the strength you have unless you're put to the test."

In a world of Insta-perfection, Alexandra is refreshingly open. And that, she says, is because she knows how good it is to talk.

"Mental health is such a big thing and



**HARD TIMES:**  
After a tough few years Alexandra cherishes her loved ones more than ever

Pictures: TIM WHITBY; GETTY; REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



connections, money can't buy, so I cherish them."

As our chat draws to a close, Alexandra, toned and strong, heads for a workout. "Fitness has been a life-changing thing for

me. I've always been a tomboy.

"I used to play badminton, basketball and football for my school," she says.

This year she has put her name to a new fitness-for-all concept, Fortis, which brings high intensity, low impact gym class Speedflex to select Everyone Active centres.

"Fitness picked me up when my mum got sick. It's my escape, my therapy. It clears my mind."

"I don't do it to look good, I do it to feel good."

"I don't care about sizes or weight – I don't weigh myself. I want to be fit and healthy."

She pauses.

"But at the same time, you have to have balance and I enjoy a glass of red wine. I'm only human."

● Alexandra Burke is the ambassador for Fortis, powered by Speedflex, a new boutique fitness concept in Everyone Active. Visit [everyoneactive.com](http://everyoneactive.com)

