

STELLA

Award-winner

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Alexandra Burke

ON FEELING 'LIBERATED' AFTER SPEAKING OUT ABOUT A LIFETIME OF RACISM

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'I'm now
comfortable in my
own skin'



The Sunday Telegraph

ALEXANDRA BURKE

After years of suffering in silence, the X Factor winner recently spoke out about the racism she has endured before and during her career. The response to her emotional Instagram post was overwhelming. She tells Louise Gannon what happened next



ONE SATURDAY NIGHT at the end of June, the notoriously disciplined Alexandra Burke sat in her living room and drank a bottle of wine as she anxiously waited for a video she had just filmed to upload to her Instagram feed.

Following the killing of George Floyd by a policeman in the US, and the subsequent protests, Alexandra had decided that now was the time to speak out about her experience as a black woman in the music industry.

What she revealed – about being told to bleach her skin and straighten her hair, and the pernicious racism that has often threatened to cripple her career – caused a rip tide throughout the media. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't easy to hear. And it put her front and centre of the celebrity Black Lives Matter debate.

'I'd kept those feelings suppressed for so many years,' she tells me via Zoom as she sits

Above Alexandra in the *X Factor* final, 2008

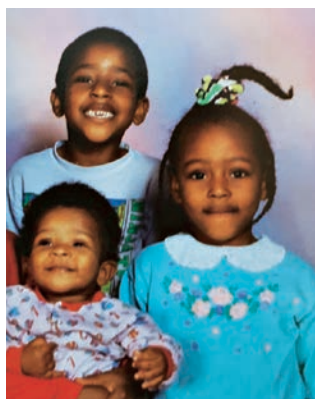
‘Finally,

I feel liberated’



FAMILY MATTERS

Alexandra with her late mother Melissa, and at four years old (right), with her brothers David Jr and Aaron



FINDING LOVE
With her boyfriend, footballer Angus MacDonald



'Speaking out has changed so many things. I've stopped being scared. I feel I can be the woman my mother raised me to be'

THE REVELATION

'I got told to bleach my skin... still to this moment it breaks my heart,' Alexandra said on Instagram in June

in the large, bright living room of her Hertfordshire home. 'All I'd ever thought since I got into the industry was that I was so lucky to be given the chance to sing that I had to just suck it up and smile, and do what I was told.

'I was 100 per cent focused on pleasing people. I kept pushing down any pain or humiliation because I was terrified that if I said something the door would slam in my face.'

Her post was applauded by fans and celebrities, including her former label boss, Simon Cowell. Her career did not implode. Her fourth album will be released next year, preceded by an EP this year. And next year she will also star as the lead in the first West End stage show of the film *My Best Friend's Wedding* (in the role made famous by Julia Roberts).

Today, in her tracksuit bottoms and baggy grey top ('my lockdown uniform', she jokes) Alexandra looks happier than I've ever seen her. In our previous encounters she's been fiercely switched on, never dropping her guard. This afternoon she is completely open, talking to me about her anxiety, and the therapy that she's been having via Zoom. She relays funny stories about being on her own during lockdown, including driving to Leeds to visit her Hull City footballer boyfriend, Angus MacDonald. They hadn't seen each other for six weeks. 'I was too scared to stop at any service station because I'm being so careful, so it wasn't a romantic reunion: I got out of the car shouting, "I need the loo!" and rushed right past him.'

I tell her how chilled out she seems. She laughs and her long braids – her 'freedom braids' – swing behind her back as she shakes her head. 'Since that post, I feel liberated. I feel strong enough to stand by what I have said. I can stop worrying, and start

really believing in myself.

'It has changed so many things. I feel comfortable in my skin and I finally think it's OK for me to have kids. I've always felt if I did, I'd never be able to take time out and then come back because my spot would be taken by someone else. I've always had it in my head that there's not much room for black female performers. But now,' she adds, 'I've stopped being scared. I feel I can be the woman my mother raised me to be.' And then she bows her head and tears roll down her face.

Alexandra is hugely successful – with an estimated worth of £8 million – thanks to winning *X Factor* at the age of 19 in 2008. The second-eldest of four children born to chef David Burke and singer Melissa Bell, she grew up in Islington, north London. Life changed when she was six, and her father walked out, leaving her mother to support the family – although they reconciled 14 years later. Melissa was part of the double-Grammy Award-winning British R&B collective Soul II Soul, but the group split up when Alexandra was eight. Melissa also sang backing vocals for Elton John, Whitney Houston, Liza Minelli and George Michael.

Many might believe that Melissa's remarkable career would have meant she was a wealthy woman. It was not the case. 'There were glamorous moments, of course,' says Alexandra, 'but what I saw was Mum getting up early, being exhausted, and never standing still. I saw her having to always be strong. When she was



away, we were looked after by my auntie Sonia and grandad, Ivan. And Mum never had the recognition she should have had, partly because she had a family and partly because she knew that as a black woman it was always going to be tougher.'

Melissa, who suffered from chronic diabetes that led to kidney failure, died in 2017, aged 53, less than 24 hours before Alexandra had to make her debut as a contestant at the launch of *Strictly Come Dancing*. Her mother had insisted throughout her illness that her daughter carry on with the show. This she did, incurring criticism from the tabloid press, which devolved into endless stories about Alexandra behaving like 'a diva', allegedly rowing with her *Strictly* partner Gorka Marquez.

'I couldn't believe it was happening,' she says. 'All these stories, which were totally untrue, kept appearing in the press and I felt completely victimised at this terrible time. My family were in pieces because we'd just lost Mum, but my way of dealing with it was to practice for 12 hours a day, and to fixate on that two-and-a-half minutes where I'd be dancing in front of the judges and studio audience. That's the time when no one could touch me.'

Supported by her grieving family, who kept telling her that Melissa would want her to do well, she finished runner-up to *Holby City* actor Joe McFadden.

Thanks to the enforced pause caused by Covid lockdown, Alexandra has been having life coaching. 'I realised I never really processed Mum's death or properly grieved,' she



says. 'I never gave myself the space and time to come to terms with it. So that's what I've been doing.' She tells me to look behind her on the wall, where a framed photograph of her mother takes pride of place among other family photos of her two brothers, sister, father, aunts, uncles and cousins.

It turns out that everything – from her Instagram post to her braids to her new-found sense of self and her very career – begins and ends with Melissa. Alexandra was five years old when she went to *Top of the Pops* to see her mum perform with Soul II Soul, and decided that she, too, wanted to be a singer. Melissa took her seriously. 'She made me learn the right way to sing. If there was an opportunity, she'd get me on a stage with her, whether it was a big show or a little club or a bar mitzvah.'

It was her mother who told it to her straight about being a black woman in the industry. 'She'd tell me, "You have to work harder because you are black. There is less space for you. You have to be better. You have to do more. You have to sacrifice everything else."'

At 12, Alexandra lost out to Joss Stone on a BBC talent contest. At 16 she almost got a record deal, but was ultimately told that they 'already have a black artist and don't need another'. Her mother couldn't afford the fees for stage school, so instead she trained Alexandra in vocal techniques. When, aged 19 in 2008, Alexandra missed the *X Factor* solo auditions, her mother went with her and they sang as a duet – with Melissa deliberately singing slightly off-note. They were told they wanted to see Alexandra again, but not with her mother. 'That's exactly what I wanted to hear,' Melissa told the stunned panel as she left the room.

Despite problems with her health, Melissa went to every single one of her daughter's *X Factor* performances. Alexandra laughs, recalling, 'Mum was so fierce. She would tell me, "You have to annihilate all the competition. You can do it, girl!"' When the finalists were given the Leonard Cohen song *Hallelujah* to sing in the bid to pick the winner, Alexandra rang Melissa in tears. 'I said, "I can't sing this song. I'm going to get voted out." And my mother said, "Who is this on the phone? Get my daughter to call me. This is not the woman I raised." And she hung up.

'I was stunned. And then I thought: she wants me to stand up for myself and work out my way. I rang her back, and said, "Mum, I know what I can do – I'll gospel the song up." She screamed and said, "You're gonna Whitney the living daylights out of it!"'

It proved to be Alexandra's winning moment – sung before a beaming Beyoncé. The song went to number one all over Europe, selling a million copies in Britain and kick-starting her career as a solo performer.

And then it all changed. Alexandra tells me that during the recording of her first album in Los Angeles in 2009, a member of her management team (she will not name names) said her family was not allowed into the studio while she worked, even though

she had paid for all her family to come out to California to stay with her. 'I didn't understand it, but I didn't want to kick up a fuss.'

Neither did she demur when, throughout her career, she was told by various people never to wear braids, to keep her hair straight and always to smile, 'otherwise you could look difficult and it won't appeal to the audience we want you to reach'.

'I am embarrassed that I went along with it,' she says. 'But I was just 20 and it made me feel I had to be more grateful, and that somehow I was less. When it was suggested I bleach my skin, I knew I would never do that – but just the fact that someone has said that to you doesn't make you feel good about yourself. I always felt anxious. If tickets went on sale



ON STAGE

Alexandra with partner Gorka Marquez on *Strictly*, and in concert at Manchester Pride in 2018



'I talked to Angus about the fact that, if we had kids, even though he is white, they would be seen as black. And that he needed to understand what that meant'

for a tour I'd think, no one will buy them.'

She has always wanted a family but has also always thought it would be harder for her. She nods. 'I grew up with a mother who could have been a massive star, but we struggled financially throughout my childhood.

'Mum used to say to me when I was younger, "No babies yet. Focus on work." I knew she was right. I've worked so hard to be where I am now. I've toured non-stop, put out three albums, worked with charities, performed in musicals in the West End [*Chess*, *Chicago*, *The Bodyguard* and *Sister Act*].

'And then, when Mum was dying, she'd say, "It's OK. You can work it out. Go get me some grandchildren." And she's so right. I've made a decision I am going to have children before I'm 34, and that feels great.'

Initially after George Floyd was killed in May, friends of Alexandra urged her to speak out about her experiences. She says, 'I didn't want to say anything. I guess I was still scared. But then I'd lie awake at night crying, thinking about my brothers, my mum, about myself. Then one day I was sitting in front of this photo of Mum, chatting with a songwriter about what I'd been through.

'I felt my mum very strongly telling me to speak up. I stopped the conversation and told him I had something I needed to do. Then I went on to my phone, pressed record and just started to talk. I didn't prepare, I didn't think, I just spoke. My assistant was living with me at the time. I told her what I'd done and I tried to upload it, but it just wouldn't upload. Part of me felt so anxious but part of me felt relieved. So I put on music, got out two bottles of wine and the two of us drank and danced until it finally went online and then I just went to bed thinking, "What will be, will be."'

It took her five days to respond to the thousands of positive messages she received. In terms of any image of her as a 'difficult, demanding diva', she feels this has changed perceptions. 'And I've had conversations I've never had before in relationships,' she adds.

'I talked to Angus about the fact that, if we had children, even though he is white, the kids would be seen as black. And that he needed to understand what that meant.

'I told him that if I didn't hear from my brothers for a few days I'd worry something bad had happened, or something involving the police, because that's how it is when you're black. It's part of your life. When I gave my mum money to buy a car, she was turned away from two Mercedes dealers because they didn't think she looked like she could afford that car.'

But good things are also happening. After singing at the Commonwealth Day service at Westminster Abbey in March, she met and bonded with the Duchess of Sussex – going on to become an ambassador of the Smart Works charity, of which Meghan is a patron and *Stella* is a media partner. Their chat gave rise to much speculation on Twitter. She laughs. 'It was a private conversation, but Meghan is someone I really admire. Her mum reminds me of my mum. I feel she has had a hard time in the media, and you don't want to believe it, but it does make you question if it is all down to racism.'

She swings her braids as she talks about the Melissa Bell Foundation, which she set up three years ago in conjunction with Sylvia Young, in memory of her mum, to put underprivileged kids through stage school. 'The best tribute to her.'

The braids are here to stay, she says, and grins: 'They remind me of who I was before I got famous. They remind me of who I *am*. You have no idea how good it feels to finally just be me.'

Melissa would be so proud. **✍**
Alexandra will feature in Notting Hill Carnival online celebrations throughout August; nhcarnival.org

STELLA

