



Making It Matter

Power of Song

After seeing her boyfriend murder her estranged husband, this R & B singer turned her experience into music—and is now helping other victims of violence and domestic abuse

BY SUSAN MCCLELLAND

Last summer, when Kim Davis performed at Youth Day in Toronto, the standing-room-only crowd of all ages gave the 28-year-old R & B star their highest praise: They sang along as she belted out her Juno-nominated single, “Show Me the Way.”

“Kim can connect with everyone,” says local radio DJ Jeni McKenzie. Fans include Alicia Keys, Hollywood A-lister Jamie Foxx (who personally asked her to sing at his Toronto show) and the awestruck vendor at the Tim Hortons where Davis regularly drops in for coffee.

Davis is, of course, as good as they come in the highly competitive reggae/hip-hop scene. But talent aside, a bigger reason she is so well liked is that she exhibits none of the ego associated with the music industry. Much of that left her, she admits,

when she nearly died at the hands of an abusive boyfriend, who killed her estranged husband. “Death changed my outlook on life,” she explains. “It made me reanalyze everything important to me.”

A single mother, Davis cares for her two children, Jazzmyn, eight, and Kareem, six. Between the duties of motherhood and her busy touring and recording sessions, she performs at charitable events around Toronto, raising money for women’s shelters and programs. In addition to fundraising, Davis mentors abuse victims, sharing with them her own story of recovery. “A lot of the women in the shelters are at a place in their lives where they are broken,” says Davis. “Some can’t even remember the things they used to do that they loved. I was there once myself.”

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In early 2005, Davis's R & B career was in its nascent stages. It came as no surprise that music would be her calling, given her family background. Born in Toronto to South African parents, Davis grew up surrounded by music. Her grandmother, Anita Simpson, is a jazz singer in South Africa, and her father worked as a jazz guitarist in Cape Town, which is where Davis lived for some of her teenage years. She sometimes joined her father on-stage, singing during his gigs.

The racial segregation and growing violence in Cape Town prompted the family to move back to Toronto. There, Davis began writing music and singing backup for several well-known local performers. She also wrote and sang the lead song for a cable network television show called *Caribbean Vibrations*. Her work soon caught the attention of music-industry officials, who asked her to pen a song for Barbadian superstar Rihanna.

But just as Davis's professional life was starting to get off the ground, personal troubles struck. She and her childhood sweetheart, Mohamed Hussein, whom she had married when she was 19, decided to separate. In the midst of this breakup,



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Davis met Toronto rapper Clinton “Mikey” Gordon, a man who, she says, was “gentle and kind, and made me laugh.” Within six months, they were dating. That’s when the problems started. “Mikey became controlling,” says Davis. “He wanted to know where I was at all times.” This, in turn, led to physical abuse.

Davis didn’t know whether to stay or leave. “My mind was twisted,” she says. “I was vulnerable, hurt and emotional from my breakup with Mohamed.” She started to lie when close friends and family confronted her about her black eyes and bruises. “They knew. But I chose Mikey over the people I trusted most.”

Hussein eventually found out about the physical abuse. On the evening of November 25, 2005, he rushed to Davis’s house, fearing for her safety. He saw Gordon’s car in the driveway and called Davis from the street. When she didn’t answer, he broke down the door. “It was chaos,” says Davis, whose two children were inside sleeping. “It was cold. I was in my pyjamas. Mikey and Mohamed began fighting on the driveway.”

Davis leaped between the two

men to break up the fight—but Gordon had a knife. The last thing Davis remembers, before waking in a hospital room surrounded by six police officers, was Hussein clinging to her as they crawled up the front steps, which were slippery with blood.

Stabbed multiple times, Hussein succumbed to his injuries in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Davis had three knife wounds, one of which was on her face.

In 2008 Gordon was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to six years in prison.

After her week-long stay in hospital

to recover from her physical injuries from the attack, music became Davis's lifeline. "Writing was where I poured all my grief and pain," she explains. When Davis learned that Rihanna hadn't picked up her song, titled "Sometimes," she decided to record it herself.

"There are two kinds of people in this world: those who buckle under adversity and those who rise above it," says her producer and mentor, Dre Knight. "Kim is the latter."

Davis's first album, fittingly entitled *Live, Love, Learn*, was released in 2008 and draws on her healing journey after her abuse and Hussein's death. "She's telling real life stories," is how one Toronto DJ praised Davis's songwriting skills. "You can just hear the pain." The song titles say it all: "Ashamed," "Empty," "Sometimes" and the Juno-nominated "Show Me the Way."

t's 2009, and Davis is standing in the boardroom of Dr. Roz's Healing Place in Toronto, a small scar visible on her cheek. She's recounting the story of Hussein's death to the 14 women seated around her, all of whom have just escaped abusive relationships. Their eyes are wide. Many nod in understanding, especially when Davis admits that she was fraught with guilt after her husband's murder.

"I had so many opportunities to call the police, to run away screaming, but I didn't," she says. "I felt that calling the police would just make matters worse. Instead, the worst happened. Someone I loved died, and my children will never get their father back."

Davis, whose second album, *Only*

One, will be released this year, now sports a tattoo on her leg that says "Blessed." She has learned the hard way to make life matter.

"Seize the opportunities in front of you," she says. "Appreciate what you have before you start counting what you don't have. You're alive! That, in itself, is something to celebrate."

"Kim may be the 'it' girl in Toronto's music scene," says Atiba Roach, a Toronto rap artist who runs Dr. Roz's youth programs. "But for the women I see every day at the centre, Kim gives them hope that they can overcome their obstacles. She isn't just a talking head," he says. "She's one of *them*." ■