

Elm Street Magazine (Canada, 2000)

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Elm Street (Canada, October 2000)

A star in the making

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Nelly Furtado has the voice and the songs – and a lot more. She’s got a hot manager and the likes of Spielberg and Geffen banking on her as the next pop sensation.

Chris Smith sits behind a big desk in a small, windowless office (better for the concentration, he believes), remembering the first time he saw Nelly Furtado behind the mic. It was three years ago on the stage of a Toronto club. “My first impression? She was the only white female at the Honey Jam, a showcase of black women performers.” He breaks into laughter. “She stood out.”

That wasn’t all that caught his attention. “I thought she had incredible tone, the way she delivered her material.”

Now she’s added her name to the diverse roster of Canadian talent he manages, sure that she’s an emerging pop star. From the first night he saw her on stage, Smith noticed, “she was definitely on her own path.”

It’s a path that covers a lot of territory. Her musical influences range from pop to hip hop and world music. At 21, Furtado writes her own melodies, does some arranging and pens all her own lyrics, moving way past “girl meets boy.” Take the opening track of her debut recording – Whoa Nelly!, to be released in late October. That song, “Hey Man,” moves from lines like “We are part of a circle, it’s like a Mobius strip, it goes round and round ‘til it loses a link” to her crooning “I don’t want ambivalence no more, no, I don’t want ambivalence no more!” There’s nothing ambivalent about any of it. Not the album title (“I thought I’d ruin journalists’ headlines,” she jokes), not the passionate lyrics, not the focused power of her voice. Nor the buzz that Smith, her record label and an online marketing company are working hard to create.

As Whoa, Nelly! hits the stores, Furtado is getting the kind of American media exposure that a new Canadian artist usually only dreams about. Interview magazine plans to include her in an October feature spread on “unstoppable women in music,” while Spin is preparing a short article on her. She got her first continental mention in no less a publication than Vanity Fair, which in June devoted a page to her as an up-and-comer and described her CD as “much anticipated.” Entertainment Weekly has also run a piece. Closer to home, her interview with Elm Street is her first significant Canadian coverage. Not the least of the buzz around the young singer is the fact that she was signed by DreamWorks Records, the Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen conglomerate. “Nelly is unlike anyone I’ve ever heard,” says Beth Halper, the A. & R. executive responsible for Furtado. “She’s a huge priority for the label.”

So how did a down-to-earth, second generation Portuguese-Canadian girl from Victoria land in the Spielberg kingdom? It started with her family, whose embrace of Portuguese culture was responsible for her love of singing. (Her first performance, at the age of 4, was to a crowd of 300 at a Portuguese festival.) Her family is also responsible for her appreciation of hard work: for eight summers she made beds alongside her mum, a chambermaid at the Robin Hood Motel. She grew up seeing her dad push himself hard at two jobs, as a stonemason and a landscaper. Furtado’s background might not seem a likely springboard for a musician, until you take a look farther back to what she describes as “a deep musical history in my family.” Her grandfather and an uncle were marching-band musicians and composers from the Azores. They are both dead now, but “everyone in the family talks about them, tells stories about them.” She met her grandfather only once, on a family trip to Portugal. “I only knew him for a week or two before he died. But I feel it was long enough to gauge his spirit.” That’s an intriguing thing about Furtado: she can slide notions such as “gauging one’s spirit” into a conversation and have them sound completely natural.

From an outside perspective, Victoria isn’t what one would imagine as an incubator for cultural diversity. Furtado takes issue. “It was a British colony, so that comes with a certain culture – there are several places in Victoria that serve afternoon tea. But I grew up around really great multicultural friends. I could be going to a salsa dance one week,” she continues, “a bhangra dance the next, the next weekend eating Chinese New Year’s food at a friend’s house. So it was really cool, really diverse. And of course, in every community now there’s a hip-hop element. It’s gone so universal!”

Furtado is a diminutive beauty with luminous blue eyes, who is at her most confident when talking about music. No wonder – she’s lived and breathed it since childhood performances at church and in school bands, since mimicking Janet Jackson video dance routines with girlfriends. She was singing along with Mariah Carey at age 12, immersing herself in urban music (hip hop, soul, R&B) by her mid-teens, then absorbing alternative artists like Radiohead and Beck. Next stop, music from around the globe. Particularly the music of Portugal, but also stretching out to include artists like the late Pakistani musician Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (genius of qawwali, the devotional music of Sufism) and to bossa nova, the current darling of the Jazz-DJ club scene. Furtado’s into all of it.

At times she seems even younger than 21. With unguarded openness, she’ll complete a sentence with: “Am I babbling?” But clearly – she might want to work this one into her next album title – she’s not nervous Nelly. That certainly was there from the start. “I always knew I would sing,” Furtado says calmly. “It’s not about the fame, it’s about connecting with people.”

It’s also about a personal kind of quest. “There’s a way of using the voice as something to travel with,” she says, referring back to Khan. “From what I know, his performances were about reaching a higher level of consciousness through singing. Yeah, I’m super-interested in that.”

This seems more than a passing interest. Furtado says, without a trace of self-consciousness, “I have achieved trancelike states while singing before. The first time was in my room in Victoria with a guitar, and I was singing and singing and singing. And I think that’s when I really understood Nusrat, and wanted to check him out more. And that’s the same reason I love Jeff Buckley.” (Buckley, a singer-songwriter with a cult following, died in 1997. He was also fascinated by Khan.)

Nelly Furtado definitely runs a little deeper than the average pop star.

Entertainment Weekly described her as “the thinking woman’s Christina Aguilera,” and on the first listen to the CD, the comparison is understandable. She is fully capable of the little girl sexpot voice. But look at the songwriting, it’s almost a parody of Aguilera and her ilk. Check out “Baby Girl,” with lyrics like “Don’t you gaga goo no coochy-coo girl now, I’m so much more, can’t you see?”

When I tell Furtado I like the recording, she asks straight away if I think it’s too diverse. It’s true there’s a big range – from baby-girl voice with decidedly non-baby girl lyrics to singing in Portuguese on one song (“Scared of You”) to sounding at moments on another track (“Legend”) like a cousin of Portishead’s Beth Gibbons. But it somehow all fits. One thing Furtado isn’t worried about is whether the kids will get it. “I think it speaks to counterculture kids who have grown up listening to all different styles of music.”

Furtado’s first foray as an adult performer was through trip-hop, an offshoot of hip-hop made famous by Portishead. For lovers of introspective pop alternatives, Portishead and its melancholy, eerie ballads defined the sound of the summer 1995. When Furtado first moved to Toronto for a year at age 17 (she lived with relatives), she formed a trip-hop duo called Nelstar. Her move to the big city was formative, but at times almost too intense.

“Imagine being 17 and coming to Queen Street West at night in a new city on the subway to go to a little studio to make trip-hop music. It was a very important but weird period.”

The memory makes her uncomfortable and she quickly switched to the second person, as if she’s talking about someone else. “You’re going through all those feelings of adolescence anyway, and the music you’re making is a bit sad, and you’re a bit lonely.” It was weird and sad enough that she decided to go on a brief European backpack jaunt with friends, then move back to Victoria to “pretend to be a kid for another year.”

Before she left Toronto though, she met two people who would become key to her future: Gerald Eaton, from the multi-platinum Canadian band the Philosopher Kings, and his manager, Chris Smith. It was at the music industry talent night called the Honey Jam, held at the club Lee’s Palace. At the time, Smith was just one of a number of businessmen who saw something special in Nelly Furtado and wanted to talk. She didn’t. “I was like, manager schmanager kind of thing. No interest in lawyers and managers, so not ready. You know, 18. Just not ready.” But

subsequent work writing songs and making demos with Eaton and his Philosopher Kings bandmate Brian West changed that, convincing her to sign on. Eaton recalls telling Furtado that Smith “is so incredibly devoted and honest, two absolutely important things in a manager. He is also a very smart businessman.” He adds, “I think every one of Chris’s clients is very close to him. It’s a tight-knit group – we call it the Royal Family. Some people outside of it have told me they see that and envy it.”

If Furtado’s potential fame has any seriousness behind it, that’s due to Smith, whom Eaton now dubs, “an international manager extraordinaire.” Today, Smith’s core staff consists of six full-time people in the Toronto office, with another 10 who divide their time between offices in Kingston, Jamaica, and New York City. Some of the staff are associated with Fiwi Music, his reggae record label. That wasn’t the story when Eaton first met Smith at a Philosopher Kings gig six years ago. Then the manager was just getting his company going. Today the CDs of dozens of hopeful candidates sit next to Chris Smith’s stereo, attesting to his reputation. He has worked hard to brand himself as a maverick, and that appeals to a certain kind of artist.

Haydain Neale of the soul/pop group Jacksoul has been a client of Smith’s for four years and credits him with a unique combination of marketing skills wedded to a real understanding of the artist. “He believes in your artistry and goes to bat for it.

And he has a methodic, linear way of mapping things out. I always know what’s happening, what the next step is going to be.” Neale says Jacksoul’s success is due in part to Smith’s methods. (The group’s single, “Can’t Stop” sits at 71 in the 100 most popular Canadian singles since 1975.)

Despite Furtado’s initial anxieties over signing with anyone, Smith was won her over. “The cool thing is he’s not an artist, he comes from a marketing and business background, which really helps. I value his opinions.” As we head toward Smith’s compact King Street offices, she talks more and more about their connection. “I think that one of the reasons that Chris and I get along is that we come from similar working-class background. And he’s from an island – his background is Jamaican – and my parents are from an island, too. So he understands that traditional, islander sort of mentality. We’re a good team. He gets me, I get him.”

Talking to Chris Smith in his office, it’s clear that “getting Nelly” is foremost.

First, there’s the all-important “imaging” of the would-be pop star: “Nelly likes to wear her own clothes, she doesn’t like to be told how to dress, she doesn’t like to be made up like a model – which every photographer thinks she should because she’s so beautiful.” Then there’s a manager’s perception of where her strengths lie. “She knows what great music is, and she’s not about to let anybody else dictate.”

Several spins of Furtado’s CD later, I’m leaving Smith’s office certain that his own passion for music is one of the hooks for his clients and young employees. Although he will talk about business, he clearly relishes talking about music and his artists more. Maybe sealing himself off from distractions in the darkness of his windowless office, and from the schmoozy end of the music industry, is one of his smartest moves.

“I don’t do a lot of industry-type things,” he says. “I’m hanging out with the kids at the club, in the corner somewhere, watching them, watching how they react. I’m at the basement parties. It’s where music is created. If there’s someone at the party I need to know to help the cause – which is to get the music to the masses – then I’ll show up. Aside from that, I’m hanging out in the studio with Nelly or at rehearsals or a cool little band jam.”

Part of his process with a new artist is to spend intensive time with him or her until the person is launched. That’s the kind of time he and Furtado have spent for months now. Will it be hard to let go? “Yeah, because she was the first female artist I put out. My little sister.”

It remains to be seen if the rest of the world will “get” Furtado, too. The months of touring in the United States and some dates in Canada this Autumn will be the litmus test. Will the mainstream listeners meet the challenge of Furtado’s diverse music, with its less-than-gentle lyrics? “It’s so much easier to stay down there guaranteeing you’re cool,” she writes, “Than to sit up here exposing myself trying to break through/Than to burn in the spotlight, turn in the spitfire/Scream without making a sound.”

Nor has Furtado had road experience – she’s never even had her own band before. That there is a buzz about her is all due in large part to Smith making sure that samplers from the album have made their way into hands of music industry people, not to mention into the hands of her potential audience. That’s been accomplished by the aid of an on-line company called M80 Interactive Marketing, hired by DreamWorks to spread the word via a Nelly Furtado e-group. Avid music fans are targeted through message boards and fan sites, and directed to a web site where they can hear some of Furtado’s music. If they like it, they can become part of Furtado’s “street team,” a kind of cyberspace subcommittee bent on spreading the word about her. The interest in Furtado has been “unusually high for an artist without a recording out yet,” says Joey Muran, an M80 coordinator.

The summer was also time for Furtado to begin quietly getting her stage legs with the Whoa Nelly! material. She played a number of small, unannounced gigs, away from media scrutiny. In fact, the only significant live exposure Furtado has had so far is four dates on Sarah McLachlan’s 1999 Lilith Fair tour. But Smith is super-confident. “At the end of the day there’s no category for Nelly. Just like you have Madonna, or Michael Jackson.”

Just a tad hyperbolic, but Smith is right about one thing. When you hear Furtado’s music, whether you like it or not, whether it makes her a star or an object of cult devotion, it’s indisputably singular. It’s just Nelly’s.

By Li Robbins, Elm Street

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