

By Iris Wiener

With a voice as throaty and full as Aretha Franklin's and as breathtaking as Whitney Houston's, Kimberley Locke gives new meaning to the title of pop star. A model for any woman lacking in self-confidence or hung up on self-image, Locke is the found energy previously missing from radio airwaves. Locke demonstrates the revitalized state of female sound that she has so beautifully brought to America with the release of her first album, *One Love*.

For any listener, the name *One Love* could be thought of as a reference to many things, but it's obvious that there is an incredible amount of heart in Locke's words. With her first hit single "8th World Wonder," she proved that her third place status in season two of *American Idol* would in no way be the end of her rainbow. "To me, '8th World Wonder' is a great love song, basically," she said. "It's very positive, and it's a love song in a different style. Most love songs you think about are ballads or they're sad, but this song is just so positive. I think everybody can relate to it because everybody has been there."

Select few have been where Locke has been, as she beat thousands of hopefuls for a top slot on *AI*. It is undeniably clear that her staying power has been rightfully earned, as her album demonstrates an impressive range of distinguished sounds.

"On the album, I think people will find something for everybody," she said. "One of the things that people talked about when I was on *American Idol* was that I was versatile and I was diverse, and that's great, and so on the album I kept that going. People will find pop, pop rock, R&B. They'll find standards that are done in a jazzy tone or a blues tone. There's a little bit of everything!"

Locke continues to put a sparkle in the eye of her audiences as she gives them tunes that will stay in their heads for days

to come while delivering messages of hope and honesty. "Lyrical content was very important to me. It was one of those things that I was like, 'You know, I just don't want to sing about anything, I want it to be meaningful, so I should have a song on the album that talks about teenage pregnancy, homosexuality...' she says

Locke wasn't always going to travel the route of the performer. A Hartsville, Tennessee native, Locke grew up loving the uplifting feeling that came from belting out the words to favorite songs. At 22, she decided to stop performing with small bands in her home state and



with a great certainty in her voice. "I have a song on the album that deals with being strong and going for your dreams, and doing what you know is right and not listening to everybody else. And then there's some love songs. I would like to think of my album as dealing with different types of love whether it be a relationship or self-love. Every song has a message – a clear message."

then came her family and friends' persistent suggestion to audition for *AI*. When the show ended for Locke, she knew she was leaving a winner.

"I thought for an instant, 'Well, I could go back to school.' And then I was like, *Are You Crazy? You have this amazing opportunity, everybody knows who you are right now, you ought to see how far you can take*

this and keep going with it. And that's what I did. Because I realized that school was always going to be around, and I can always go back to school."

Now 26, Locke has since become a role model for aspiring performers of all ages, especially after her success as a full-figured artist. "It's very stressful and there's a lot of pressure on women to look a certain way, and people do make a big deal out of it. It is definitely an issue. But I think that my fans love me even more for that reason. It's really nice when I see young girls come up and they're like, 'We are so excited about you, and we're so proud of you, and we love you because you're like us.' That really means a lot to me. Does that mean I'm unhealthy, or unhealthily overweight? No, I'm not. I'm very healthy. But I have to be comfortable with myself and not be affected by the industry that way."

Locke smiles as she considers what this experience has been like for her. "One of the best things that my record label told me is that, 'We don't want you to go out and lose a bunch of weight, and we'll put this album out and you're not the same Kimberley that people have been seeing. They said, 'Don't go changing, if it's not broke don't fix it.' But I would be lying if I said it's not a lot of pressure. You just kind of have to learn how to deal with it. You have to work really hard at being comfortable with yourself," she said with a great smile.

With her second single, "Wrong," already a hit and a video for the dynamic track on its way, Locke looks forward to more live performances. Anyone that has seen her in the flesh knows that when she comes to the stage, she consistently makes number three look much better than number one.

"The live experience with me is singing – real singing. I just try to really make a good connection with the fans, and keep them involved and give them what they want – a great show!" ■