Can Shakira Conquer the World?

Her album is late. Her shrink is on the phone. And her biological clock is ticking. But nothing will stop Shakira’s quest for global domination.

By Vanessa Grigoriadis  Photographs by Max Vadukul
MOST OF THE TIME, WHEN SHAKIRA IS recording music in Nassau near her home in the Bahamas, she wears her PJs all day and hardly ever puts on shoes. But today, is supposed to be her last day of work on _She Wolf_, the album she has been creating for a year, so she’s decided to celebrate, dressing up in a silver necklace, a long black silk dress with spaghetti straps and club-kid platform shoes that lift her five-foot-two-inch frame up like stilts. “My boyfriend is six feet tall, and sometimes I feel like I’m his keychain, a small little thing,” she says, then sighs. “I am so ready for this to be over!” she exclaims. “Just told my manager, ‘I’m ready for hair and makeup. Just take me out of here.’ ” As Shakira makes her way into the studio, though, her mood begins to darken. When she can’t find the keys to her car in her Gucci handbag, she searches for them with the intensity of someone who has lost her passport before an international flight. Once she finds them, she climbs into her pristine Mercedes SUV, turns up Pink Floyd’s _Dark Side of the Moon_ and zips down a twisting coastal road, making what seems to be a very illegal U-turn, at least by U.S. standards. On one side, the road is overhung with the dense foliage of mango trees, and on the other, there’s a vast expanse of glittering Caribbean, which she throws a longing look. “I haven’t been in the ocean for so long,” she laments in the  Bahamas.”

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when her mother wasn’t thrilled about it. “I was surprised at first and thought about how her fans and Colombians were going to view it,” says her mother, Nidia, calling from Colombia. After all, 

She Wolf is largely about the difficulty of women satisfying themselves in a world where men are in charge. “We live in a society that represses women’s subconscious desires,” Shakira says, her eyes narrowing. “You know, women have to make enormous efforts through life, much larger than men. We deal with so many pressures: the pressure of aesthetics, and how society wants us to deliver our performances as mothers, daughters and wives. And then, on top of it, we must sweat it out at the gym trying to get rid of cellulite.”

That’s on the agenda today too: While she’s waiting for her makeup to finish the mix, Shakira grabs a black leather bag of gym clothes and heads to the back of a studio, where a petite trainer has set up a gym for her to train two hours a day. Dozens of elastic bands hang from the ceiling, and a step machine is set up in front of a mirror, ready to do its part in her daily diet of a zillion squats. “I do them until my leg is going to fall off,” she says. “I never went to a gym before, ready to do its part in her daily diet of a zillion squats.”

Doubt is Shakira’s way of moving through the world. She counts herself as an English-speaking world and in the Spanish-speaking world, producing She Wolf in two languages at once. Her next album is likely going to be exclusively in Spanish, and she’s preparing for a global tour after that. In fact, her boyfriend, Antonio de la Rua, the son of a former president of Argentina, is a rep in his hotel lobby to get an audience.

Her first two albums didn’t do well, though, and she was forced to take part in a soap opera that won her Best Bottom award in Colombia. After her workout, she starts to cook nutritious lunches. “In Latin America, there’s a stupid cycle where you are born poor, you will die poor,” Shakira says. “We’re trying to change that.”

Refusing to maintain the status quo has become very important to Shakira, and that’s part of why she’s refused to marry her boyfriend, even though they are monogamous and have been together for nine years. “It’s funny how the papers want to see you married, and then they want to see you divorced,” she says, with a flash of anger. “Well, I won’t do any of it.” She has also perhaps repudiated her Catholicism, though she will not overtly say so. “I’ve become very practical, very rational,” says Shakira. “I don’t see it. I don’t believe it.”

Tonight, when assistants start telling stories about seeing ghosts at Compass Point Studios, she says, “I was so afraid of ghosts when I was younger. Not anymore! I don’t believe in them.” Shakira scrolls through a hand-painted images, most with imperceptible differences, as the assistants murmur at her shoulder. “One is too confusing and unintelligible for the mind to capture it; others are ‘masculine, much too much.’ She sings. “The font should be finer,” she says, waving a hand around. ‘She Wolf’ is all about doing what you want!”

It’s almost 10 p.m. when Shakira finally gets on a conference call via Skype with Wyclef Jean’s engineer in New York to discuss the 15 versions of “Spy” he sent to her earlier in the day. She takes a seat in an Aerion chair, dead center at the computer, writing down changes to the trumpet, drums and vocals on a lined white pad. “Wyclef’s kind of bored us there right now,” she says. “He’s my friend. I’ve got to check on him.” She laughs. “You know, these songs were recorded when I was in Paris – wine, cheese, vibing it. You can’t re-create that shit.” She takes out a nail file and rubs away, shaking her head. “Yesterday when we had a conference call, I looked so terrible,” she says. She throws her bare foot up on the lip of the soundboard and wriggles it around. “That’s all I put on the webcam for him to see: just my bare foot.”

The phone call goes on for a few hours, before Shakira finally turns to her mixes. “Ah, my cravings from that cup of coffee,” she says. “I want chocolate.” She settles in to steadfast for satisfying her oral fixation with a constant stream of cereal (“130 calories a cup! Too many!”) and a miniature popsicle she made from frozen carrots, a fruit that she says is only found in Barranquilla. “I tried to plant coral here, but it didn’t work,” she says, holding her stomach from hunger. “I am a sugar addict, and late night is bad. This is when I do bad things! No, I mean eat bad things.” Then she adds, “A Freudian slip.”

The mix goes on, and she stands up in the middle of the room. Her shoes are off and her dress is so long that without them, it turns out, she can’t help but step on the hem. “I’m back to my regular height,” she says. Then she closes her eyes. “I have to focus 100 percent of my intellectual and physical energy on the music,” she says later. The track starts, and for the first time, her face completely shuts down – suddenly, she’s transformed into a totem, and even her lips seem to lose their puff, lengthening into a solid line. Then she begins to move, and this time her dance is not seductive, not for a man, not for the cameras. She jerks her arms around, her body pulsating oddly from the center of her body. It’s as though she’s possessed.

When her eyes open, they’re glassy, almost like she’s stone. She dunks her popsicle stick in her drained porcelain coffee cup and lets out a tremendous giggle. “What the hell, she says.” Let’s send this to mastering. It might be because my ears are closing up, but I hear it now with all of you and your consciousness! Print it, and I’ll hear it in the album.” She closes her eyes again, and for the first time she looks as if she’s at peace. “I’m feeling it,” she says.