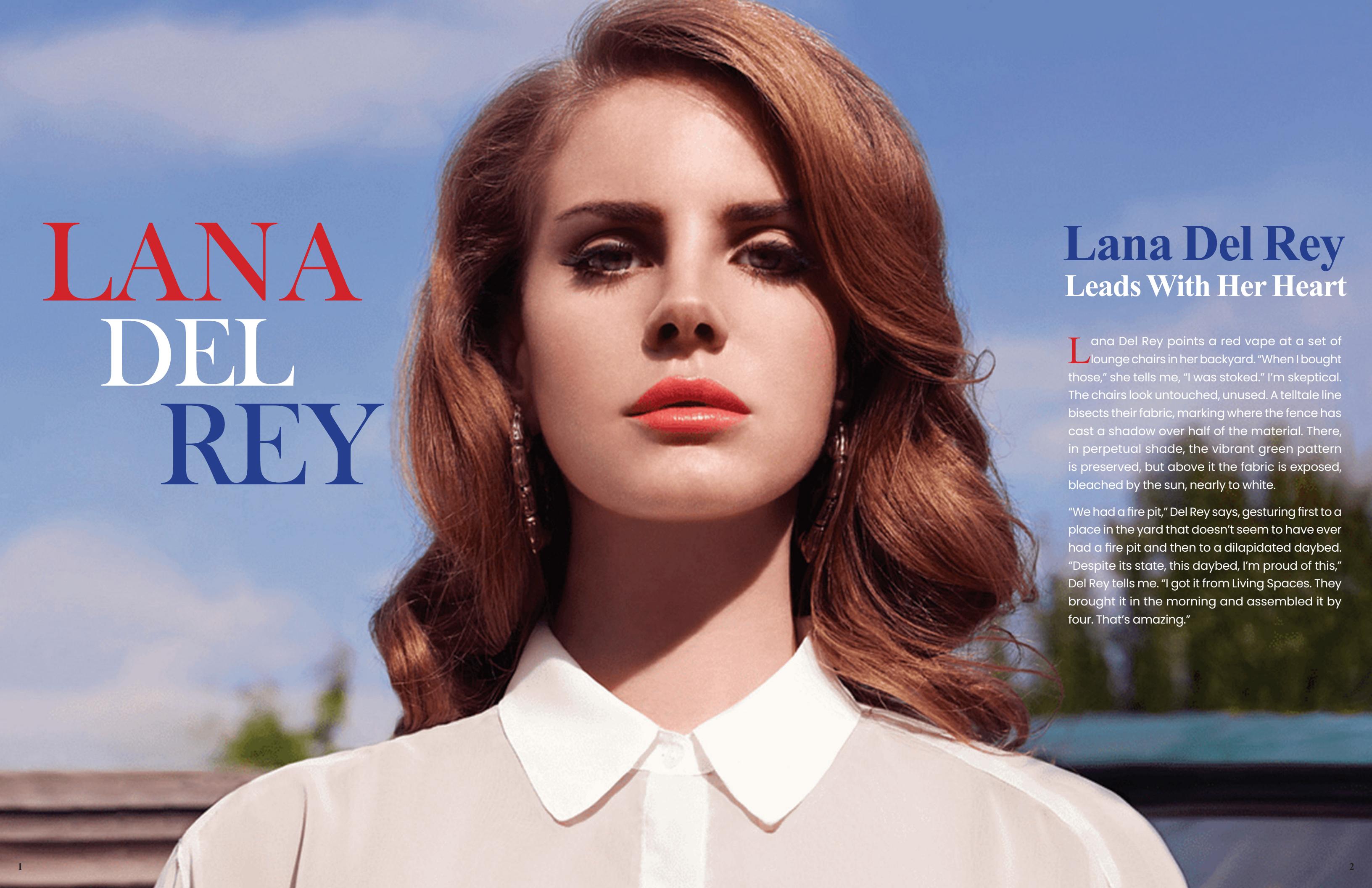


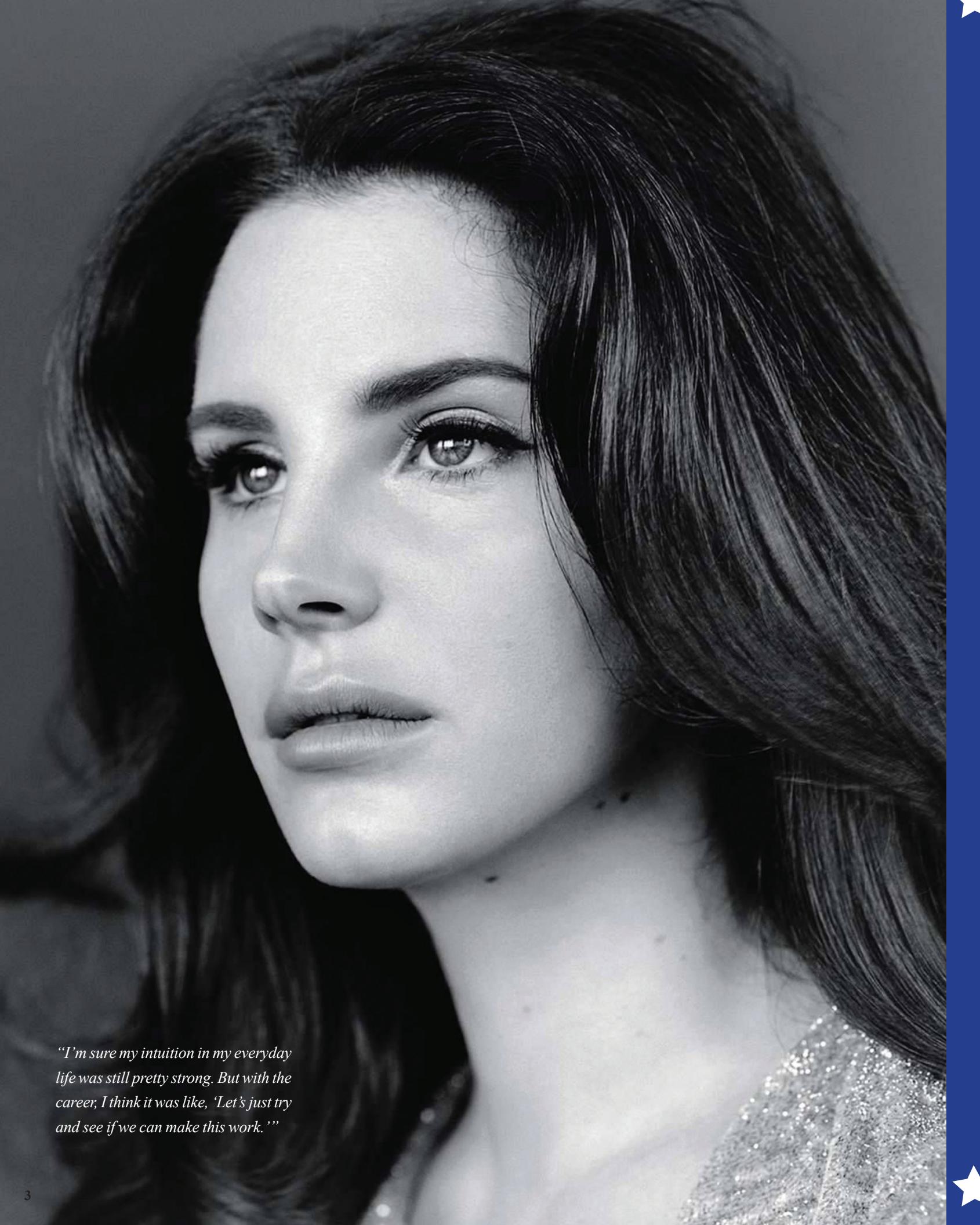
# LANA DEL REY



## Lana Del Rey Leads With Her Heart

Lana Del Rey points a red vape at a set of lounge chairs in her backyard. "When I bought those," she tells me, "I was stoked." I'm skeptical. The chairs look untouched, unused. A telltale line bisects their fabric, marking where the fence has cast a shadow over half of the material. There, in perpetual shade, the vibrant green pattern is preserved, but above it the fabric is exposed, bleached by the sun, nearly to white.

"We had a fire pit," Del Rey says, gesturing first to a place in the yard that doesn't seem to have ever had a fire pit and then to a dilapidated daybed. "Despite its state, this daybed, I'm proud of this," Del Rey tells me. "I got it from Living Spaces. They brought it in the morning and assembled it by four. That's amazing."



*"I'm sure my intuition in my everyday life was still pretty strong. But with the career, I think it was like, 'Let's just try and see if we can make this work.'"*

Is it? I wonder. Is this quick assembly of a now waterlogged and forgotten daybed amazing to Lana Del Rey, one of the most successful and influential singers, songwriters, and forces in popular music over the past decade? Some of my doubt manifests in relation to her house, which seems more set design than home, conceived to persuade me that I'm in the presence of the world's most down-to-earth multimillionaire.

To be clear, this house is charming. I can only describe it as unassuming, with a small yard of yellowing grass. But it is also exceedingly modest for a woman of Del Rey's fame and resources. The home is comfortable, clean, and simply adorned. There's little in the way of decoration other than a magazine cutout of Marilyn Monroe tacked to a window in the bathroom and a few pictures of family. Her brother, Charlie, uses a sunny room in the back as his office, and their sister, Caroline, is over often. "We process things as a family," Del Rey says, speaking to her bond with her siblings.

**"It's never alone. Some nights it's alone, but not really. We're on the same page. We're always on the same page."**

Del Rey too is simply adorned in slim jeans, a plain sweater, and ballet flats. Her long brown hair is neatly brushed, and her face is free of makeup aside from a slight and

delicate winged eyeliner—the only visual connection to the femme fatale look of her professional life. Her speaking voice is soft and lilting. She offers me a Diet Coke, a Red Bull, and a coffee, the last of which has just finished percolating in the same kind of \$30 coffee maker I had in my college dorm room. Del Rey gathers up all three beverage options for herself, along with her red vape pen, and leads me outside. The steps to the patio are broken.

At this stage, Del Rey is generally considered to be one of the most accomplished songwriters of her generation—or as some people, like Taylor Swift, have offered, the best. Her 2012 major-label debut album, *Born to Die*, has spent more than 500 weeks on the Billboard 200 chart, a feat matched among women solo artists by only Adele. Del Rey followed up *Born to Die* with a succession of artistically varied and emotionally resonant music that stirred ever-increasing devotion in her fans. Her most recent effort, *Did You Know That There's a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd.* released this past March, may be some of her best work to date. It's a sprawling, textured meditation on timeworn themes like love, family, loss, and longing.

But as I sit beside Del Rey in her backyard, taking in the house, the broken stairs, and the fading fabrics on chairs, the feeling of doubt that had been creeping up on me suddenly doubles. I know

this feeling is not coming from the house alone; it's likely more from the cultural residue of suspicion built up by critics who, in the early days, were quick to dismiss Del Rey as somehow inauthentic, a flashy faker whose career would flicker brightly and burn out. The doubt around Del Rey has long been proved to be unfounded.

I know this. And yet I still find myself searching for artifice and affect, for a peek beyond her persona to locate the space where some "realer" Del Rey is hidden. Isn't this—for me, as a profiler—my assignment?

Luckily, my friend Kelly, a thoughtful and serious Del Rey fan, sets me straight. Del Rey, Kelly reminds me, shops at Kohl's, gets awards-show dresses off the rack at the mall, and makes friends with workers at a Waffle House and starts serving people alongside them. *Did You Know That There's a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd.* is also up this year for five Grammys, including Album of the Year, to add to Del Rey's previous six nominations, and she has spent a third of 2023 on tour, headlining venues around the world. No single one of these truths negates or invalidates the authenticity of any of the others. "If you're trying to understand her through some stiff binary of persona versus authenticity," Kelly says, correctly scolding me, "you've already failed the assignment."



**S**o who is Del Rey beyond this binary?

"She's unearthly suburban and unreasonably talented, and she can pretend to be a normal person," the filmmaker and writer John Waters tells me. "I think of the ad campaign for Russ Meyer's *Lorna*," he says admiringly, referring to the 1964 sexploitation film. "[The tagline] could go for her: 'Longing, love, lust, life, *Lana*. Too much for one man.'"

Director David Lynch is also a fan. "She tells a story in her music," Lynch says. "She gives a mood and a story and a way to think, and she paints a picture in your brain."

Legendary singer-songwriter and activist Joan Baez says that the first thing that comes to mind when reflecting on her friendship with Del Rey is Del Rey's generosity. Del Rey, Baez recalls, once gave Baez's granddaughter, who was cold, the jacket off her back, gifting it to her permanently after signing the

sleeve. Baez also admires Del Rey's sense of humor. Once at a lunch together, Del Rey was struck with "a laughing fit," says Baez. "And she flattened herself out on her back on two chairs, just with her head kind of locked over the back of the chair, just laughing, just giggling and putting us all in the giggles.... She's delightful. That's a good word for her, among other things."

But my favorite story about Del Rey comes from her trusted clairvoyant Tessa DiPietro, whom Del Rey sees weekly. The two had attended a guided meditation together and were sitting in a circle with others when the leader asked them all to imagine the shape of their thoughts. "It was very kind of heady," DiPietro says. "I think people felt there was this tension in the room to have the right answer to 'What are the shape of my thoughts?' And people are saying stuff like, 'Well, my thoughts look like clouds.' And somebody else will go, 'Well, my thoughts look like little bubbles.' And we come around to *Lana*, and she's looking into space and thinking, and then she says,

### **'Men. My thoughts are all shaped like men.'**

It was so perfect because you couldn't tell if she was being ironic or not. And yet it was the most truthful answer anybody had given."

Del Rey was born Elizabeth Woolridge Grant and grew up

in Lake Placid, New York. She released music first under her own name, as Lizzy Grant. But when that failed to chart, she chose a stage name and a new look—one that pulled from the iconography of doomed beauty, a pastiche of pinup bombshell and gangster's girlfriend. She was Marilyn Monroe, Lana Turner, Priscilla Presley, Karen Black in *Easy Rider*. Her videos were a collage of images signaling the American dream gone wrong: blinking neon, leaves in the swimming pools, death and love and sex displayed before the flag. Was it one reference too many? Stage names, symbolism, and reinvention are nothing new to music. Yet in Del Rey's case, some people felt inexplicably tricked.

Upon its release, *Born to Die* was widely critically panned. The *New Yorker* said that the "Del Rey character is a combination of disaffected and cynical and romantic and brutal and naïve, which makes her sound more



forgetful than profound." The *New York Times* reduced Del Rey to a mere "pose, cut from existing, densely patterned cloth" and diagnosed her career as "founded on bad faith all around." *Pitchfork* rejected *Born to Die* as "out of touch," not just with the world but also with "the simple business of human emotion," slamming it in the closing line of the review as "the album equivalent of a faked orgasm."

Audiences disagreed. Catapulted by the success of singles like "Video Games," "Blue Jeans," and "National Anthem," *Born to Die* became the fifth-highest-selling album in the world in 2012.

Del Rey, though, was hurt. "I think in one week, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, and *New York magazine* agreed that it was the most ridiculous act that had ever come out," she says. But she rode the disorienting waves of critical rejection and commercial success in the best possible fashion: by simply continuing to write songs. "That may have been just pure 'Let's try and make this work!' energy," she says. "I'm sure my intuition in my everyday life was still pretty strong. But with the career, I think it was like 'Let's just try and see if we can make this work' instead of having it come to a brutal end."

Interestingly, Del Rey credits this period with gifting her a unique opportunity for self-reflection. When critics called her inauthentic,

she sought to understand what it was they were seeing and why it differed from how she felt.

### **"It was 100 percent authentic,"**

she says of her *Born to Die* reinvention. "It's just that where I was at the time was malleable in my own life—easy to, like, acquiesce," she explains. "I kept rereading the idea of somebody who was feigning vulnerability," she says. "[But] perhaps what they saw was what was vulnerable."

Critics have retrospectively hailed Del Rey as a singular and pioneering talent whose influence is evident in the work of artists like Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo—including *Pitchfork*, which ran a new review of *Born to Die* nearly a decade after the first one, writing, "*Lana* is reaching for something: the fulcrum point where the fear and pain of sexualization start to work as leverage." It reaffirms, even though she has nothing left to prove, that those who foresaw her career as a mere cultural

blip were—well, Del Rey puts it best: "It's almost like they were wrong," she says. "That's all. They just got it all wrong. That's all."

When I ask Del Rey how she processes just how far her career has come, her face lights up. "We're famous down in Arkansas," she says, beaming. Something magical happened there recently.

She had been booked to play the Walmart amphitheater in Rogers, and the show had sold out in hours.

