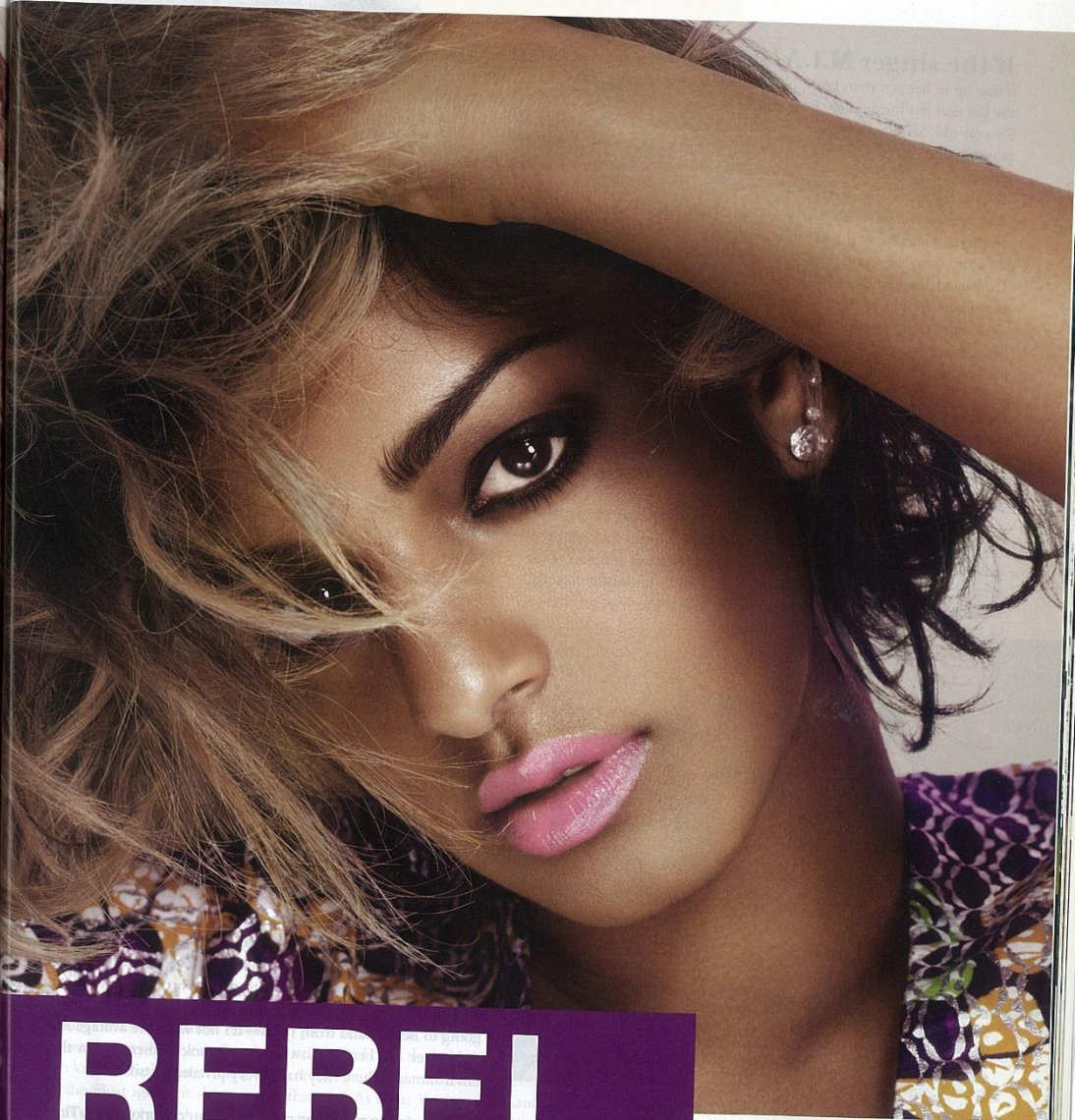




# REBEL,



# REBEL

Hip-hop renegade M.I.A. has an explosive new album. Also, a few choice words for George W. Bush, the Department of Homeland Security, the British press, the Klaxons, and the dumb suits at her record label. BY ANTHONY BOZZA. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROSS KIRTON.

**If the singer M.I.A.** (aka Maya Arulpragasam) has been living up to her acronym lately, blame the U.S. government, which for the last year has inexplicably been treating visa applications filed by the 29-year-old Sri Lankan dance-music sensation like weapons-grade plutonium. Chalk it up to her estranged father's past as a Sri Lankan revolutionary or her machine-gun beats and lyrical candor, but either way, the authorities seem to be hatin'. After making her name on the UK electronica scene with the dazzling, critically acclaimed *Arular* in 2005, she played a handful of shows in the States without a lick of trouble. But last year, when she made plans to return to record her new album with Timbaland, she found her paperwork inexplicably tangled in 10 months of red tape. In the end, she was granted just enough time to record one song with the hip-hop superproducer, by which point she'd spent most of her advance on a global vision quest—touring Liberia on a humanitarian mission and recording in India, Trinidad, Australia, Africa, and London.

The result, *Kala*, is a diabolically percussive blend of East and West, stitched together by M.I.A.'s distinctively thick schoolgirl accent. Whether or not her blistering musical output accounts for her complicated relationship with authority, the girl can't seem to catch a break. She had to convince three London traffic wardens not to ticket the car she was sitting in before this interview even got going. "They're just sitting on a wall looking at me now," she said. "Hold on. Now they're arguing about who will get to write the ticket because they get commission on that; you know, you can't do anything in London. Ugh, alright, I'm going to have to call you back." *Radar* hoped the next call wouldn't be collect from Scotland Yard. Luckily, it wasn't.



**THE KIDS STAY IN THE PICTURE** The singer recruited homegrown talent in Jamaica for the "Boyz" video off her new CD, *Kala*. Her last CD sold more than 100,000 copies.

In addition to borrowing from numerous musical traditions, *Kala* references a number of bands explicitly. "Paper Planes" mirrors the Clash's "Straight to Hell," for instance.

That song caused some problems because it features a gun being cocked and shots being fired. Interscope was like, "This is a real harsh thing, you can't have gunshots in your song." But their whole ethos as a company is built on gunshots! Have they listened to their back catalog lately? In the end, I left the sounds in—fuck it. Espe-

cially because of my immigration problem, which is the subject of the song. It was clear to me that I wasn't getting anywhere whether I followed the rules or not, so I thought I might as well release the song I wanted to release.

**A few years ago, you were warmly welcomed in the States.**

But now I'm officially a threat. I'm on your Homeland Security list. Why am I so dangerous? Why do you hate me so much? All I did was come out of art school and make a couple of songs, and now I'm a threat to democracy! I don't get it. I don't even say anything drastic in my records. The only other reason I can think of is that I once said "PLO" in a song. [The lyric is, "Like PLO, I don't surrender," from "Sunshowers."] That can't truly be it.

**Maybe it's about your dad.**

He was involved in a Sri Lankan revolutionary group, but if the FBI actually sat down and researched it, they'd discover that my dad wasn't a Tamil Tiger—he was part of one of the military groups that got destroyed by the Tamil Tigers. I'm a Sri Lankan kid who came over to England when I was 10 years old. I really grew up without a father and came out of it; I made something of myself other than stacking beans on a supermarket shelf or pumping gas. And this visa business feels like I'm getting the same punishment as if I'd had my dad. It's like paying the price twice. That's not cool, that's not fair, that's not justice, that's not democracy ... that's fucking fuck-all.

**It's not like you're singing, "Nuke Bush."**

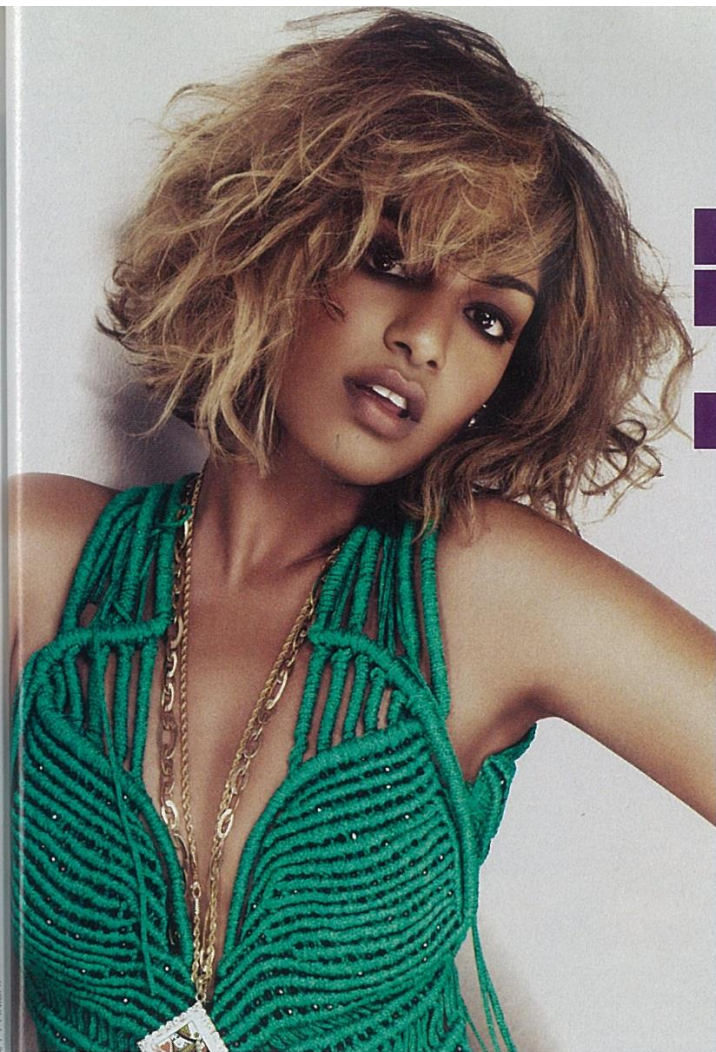
My single "Boyz" goes "N-n-n-n-n-n-na-na-na, boyz there, how many? Boyz there, how many?" Repeat 20 times. That's exactly why I made that fucking song. When the first letter came through about the visa being held up, I was like, "Okay. If this is about me singing one line that says 'PLO,' I'm gonna make a song with no lyrics whatsoever." That week I wrote "Boyz." You still gonna lock me out of the country if I sing about boys? I'm not allowed to say anything meaningful, and I'm not allowed to sing about nothing. But it's so ignorant. Do I have to wait until Bush goes out of power to come and play a show?

**After initially being denied entry into the U.S., you wound up traveling all over the world—which seems to have turned out in your favor artistically.**

The worldly vibe of the album came out of me not getting my visa. When I couldn't get in to work with Timbaland, I thought, "Okay, fine, I'll take this bag of cash and go and distribute it according to whatever, and get some people to work on this record who usually wouldn't be chosen to work on records." On most records, you're not going to hear a band from India—it's not what the average American girl singer can bring. Most of them would rather stay in their own environment where they have every privilege available.

**How would the record be different if you'd worked with Timbaland as planned?**

It probably would have been much more mainstream. My initial idea was for me and Timbaland to go on a journey, but by the time we got together, I'd been on a journey of my own. For example, the beat for "Down River" is by Morganix, a social worker from Sydney who did the track as part of a social outreach program with Aborigine kids. It's amazing. I played it for Timbaland back in August and, um, um ... he



I guess that's what happens when you choose to say something other than, "My humps, my humps, my humps."

way that America always does. That's why I made the record the way I did. I'm a civilian from a country that you don't like, that you've declared a hot spot, so I just wanted to say, "It's not as easy as that, it's way more complicated. You can't whitewash the planet into good and evil, into terrorists and non-terrorists." Ten years from now, that will ensure chaos.

#### Have you felt pressure to be less outspoken?

It's a double-edged sword, always. I don't feel lucky that I can't get into the U.S. I guess that's what happens when you choose to say something other than, "My humps, my humps, my humps." Yeah, if you have something to say, you pay the price, but it's an interesting lesson for us all. When I talk about politics, I talk about them as a daughter of somebody who was persecuted because of them. My experience with the government was discovering things like, because of them, maybe my cousin was killed. My aunt was in a refugee camp. My uncle was arrested for selling magazines. These are the stories I heard growing up. I'd hear how my neighbors got tortured to death, my cousin was hung upside down on a van and beaten. So I was always vexed about politics, and then suddenly you watch the news in London and hear that your freedom is being taken away there as well. Not just that I couldn't get on the Tube because bin Laden was going to bomb us, but having to, like, justify all these sodding two-hour airport security checks, and being treated different. I call that shit. It's useless. London is a beautiful, multicultural place, and after the 7/7 bombings it became ruled by unspoken prejudice.

#### Speaking of which, why do you think the British press has been so slow to warm up to you?

Starting out, I was stepping into a real old boys' club, and it was in nobody's interest to help someone like me make it. I was expecting there to be loads of weirdos and misfits in the music biz in the UK, but there aren't. Everyone is packaged up. If you flip through *NME*, everyone in there is still exactly the same formula: four-piece band, same hairstyle, same clothes, same stories, same songs, same guitars. It's the same shit that was happening 10 and 20 years ago—just a more watered-down version of Brit pop or punk or electronic music that's not exactly New Order. But culturally, you're not going to know who is important for 20 years, anyway. They're so quick to put Klaxons on the cover, when Klaxons are practically wearing the same clothes as me now! It's just more presentable and digestible because it's a white band. But I don't have to prove anything anymore. I am what I am, you know what I mean? **R**

did a similar beat for Snoop's "Get a Light." It comes from that song. That's why I was also like, "You know what? It's cool and everything, but I'm kinda having my own ideas and my own sounds." I had no reason to keep working with anyone in America—it would only be for their names. I had to do something different, something that only I could do. The journey of getting to work with Timbaland was more important to me than actually coming out with the song. I mean, I cried on the plane, just like, "Wow, I'm going to work with Timbaland." It was like a dream, being respected and taken note of by somebody like him.

#### How do you feel about the U.S. presidential race?

Let me in the country, then I'll tell you.

#### What about Sri Lanka these days?

Sri Lankan politics is the most fucked up piece of shit that I've ever come across. Twenty-five years into it, it's still fucked up! I don't think the Tigers know what's going on any more or less than the government does. It's the most ignorant shit you can think of. As far as I'm concerned, it's driven by money. It's led by families; it's power gone crazy. The way they think now is so brutal and disgusting. In the town where I'm from, Jaffna, 500,000 people have been systematically starved to death because the government has shut down import and export and sends one week of food every eight weeks. People are slowly dying.

#### It's not a country most Americans know a lot about.

It's really hard to define it all in a typical simplistic manner, in the