

PHOTIF

CHARLESTON IDOL

*Words by: Caroline Nuttall
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5 FT  NO DIVING



What would you expect of someone of international fame in the midst of juggling a world tour, constant press circuit and millions of screaming fans? Certainly not to sit with you for nearly three hours at Taco Boy, moments after wrapping a five hour photo shoot (where we made her fall backwards into a pool wearing an evening gown and heels), especially when she's home for just 48 hours before heading to the next stop of the *American Idol* tour in the Philippines. No, you wouldn't expect that. But Elise Testone is all kinds of surprising.

"All I want is to be seen for who I believe I am."

We've just come from her photo shoot with Sully at the Martin Luther King Jr. pool, where two young lifeguards were thrilled to work late once they spied the top 6 *American Idol*. I sit waiting for Elise as she towels off and touches up. As soon as she arrives, we ravenously order a ton of food and a flight of tequila. Cheers, clink. One shot down and Elise, who many already knew from Thursday nights at Fish and James Brown Dance Parties at The Pour House, opens up about her *Idol* experience, her music, and her life - then and now.



"I was working my ass off in Charleston, playing seven to ten gigs a week," she explains, almost in defense of her decision to go on the superstar-maker reality show.

The gigs were great, but she felt unfulfilled. At the same time, she was teaching voice lessons to young kids at Music Unlimited, which presented a deep sense of responsibility. She knew she could do more; be a greater inspiration. If she could create such an impact with a handful of kids, what could she accomplish on a large scale? She owed it to them. And so she decided, "If I could get myself in a position (to be a role model) and I could make a big difference for somebody else, I would sacrifice my privacy."

Because that's what fame is to Elise. She's never been after the spotlight or the glamour. For her, it's a decision to sacrifice one's private life. "That's what (fame) is...it's everyone judging you, and they make fun of you and you're entertainment. So it is scary. But it's time for me. I know more who I am, I'm confident in myself, I can go far and I shouldn't limit myself."

Hold up. Someone auditioned for a reality show and her sole purpose was *not* to get famous? Rather, it's the price to pay? That is correct.

In fact, she never respected the show before because she saw it as a shortcut to success, and the "old woman" in her thinks that growing pains are necessary. So she wanted to do as much as she could on her own - which she did in Charleston, booking her own gigs, handling money, hiring bands, setting up equipment. "I explored as many avenues as I could before turning myself over to the beast," she giggles nervously. And she ultimately realized, "*American Idol* is a huge platform for exposure, and for me, it's not a shortcut anymore because I've gone through my growing pains. Now, for me, it's like a test."

Just before *Idol*, she was at a low. She had suffered a lot of loss, and even booked an Amy Winehouse show, where she covered the entire "Back to

Black" album to get her emotions out. She talks about her mood swings as part of her creative process. So much so that she believes taking medicine would hinder her as an artist, since her songs are a direct expression of her emotions inside. It's not just a way of expressing her feelings, it's her only way. "If I can't sing, I'd go crazy. I have to. If I don't, it's like I'm not breathing."

"I swear I'm not a weird stalker girl, but..." Our conversation is interrupted by a fan asking for Elise's autograph. I see forty eyeballs on the patio dart over to see the famous person. Shortly after, our server shakes her hand with a cool, "you did awesome on the show." Elise is humble and unfazed and turns back to our deliciously salty chips and conversation.

And back to *Idol*. She came, she sang, she rocked Hollywood Week. The judges loved her. Somewhere in the top 40s, Randy Jackson said to her, "That had to be the best performance I have ever seen on this show." She tells this to me proudly, and then quickly slips into feeling bummed they didn't air it, and then self-doubt creeps in as she wonders aloud if she should have even told me that. But then she talks about the "coolest moment" of the first live show, with the young girls in the front row looking up at her, looking up *to* her, and she's back.

She never worried about the competition aspect because she envisioned it all so clearly that there was never any doubt. She knew in her bones, "I'm going to go far. I'm going on tour. There's no way I'm going home." And so she put everything she had into each song. "I want to bring you a moment where you don't think of anything else. Where you're just lost in a feeling." And she did that for the better part of the show's run, when she finally got eliminated in 6th place out of 150,000 hopefuls. So don't pity her for not winning. She couldn't care less. It was never about winning.

The best moments on the show for Elise were clearly meeting the established musicians. Stevie Nicks saying she'd hire her. Meeting Brian from Queen. Grabbing kindred spirit Steven Tyler's face and saying, "I see you" and him responding, "I see you too." Singing to one of her own idols since 6th grade, Gwen Stefani, and seeing her in awe. She describes the overwhelming feeling: "I can even inspire someone who inspired me when I was a kid. Those are the moments I really cherish."

Obviously there were moments she doesn't cherish. She references Whitney Houston week and I can almost see that defensive, protective shell go up around her. She immediately knew she wanted to sing "Greatest Love Of All" ("best song ever!") but was pressured to choose another song. So Elise folded and sang "I'm Your Baby Tonight." Enter harsh criticism ("they ripped me apart") and a stone-faced Elise, leading to the first public backlash from fans complaining that she doesn't smile. Lesson learned? Always stick to your gut.

The tour she loves. At every show, there's a press circuit beforehand where the Idols stand under big signs with their names and a long line of press wait to talk to her. "Or there's no one, 'cause they're all in Phillip's line," Elise laughs. You have the option to meet and greet the hundreds of screaming fans outside, which Elise takes pride in.

How has *Idol* changed her life? She can't give you that answer. The self-proclaimed slight manic-depressive talks about her intense highs and lows



before and during the show (of course her best songs come from the lows - enter the Adele comparison). Today, coming off of a regimented tour schedule, she is balanced. And for Elise, that leaves her feeling odd. She feels "less human" than she did in sheer chaos. She knows her life has changed forever, but at the moment, she only feels pressure to do great things. She's in a weird spot. It's scary and she's on her own now, plopped down from the big sky of *American Idol* mania and everything is suddenly quiet. "I'm confused, I don't know how I feel. The unknown scares me a little."

It's likely even scarier when 19 Entertainment, the management company partnered with *American Idol*, optioned to not pick her up after the show ended. Sure, they're probably looking for more moldable young talent to control and it may ultimately serve Elise best, but it's scary nonetheless. She's out there on her own without a management contract or so much as a phone number for Steven Tyler. But she is 95% certain she'd like to start her own production company and get a distribution deal with a major label where she could bring on one of her students and two Charleston artists, presenting all four artists together. Today, Elise feels independent and successful- she's accomplished what she set out to do to this point. She is more confident post-*Idol*.

Elise Testone has battled. She is sensitive and modest and terrified to trust people for fear of being taken advantage of. She takes the last shot of tequila and tells me where she came from.

Growing up in an earthy town in New Jersey, she became a little adult early on. Her sister was always the center of attention and her father was scary-strict (they're all close today), so Elise kept to herself. She only wanted to wear flowy dresses and had to twirl at least 20 times whenever she put one on. Her mom grounded her once for refusing to wear shorts to go out and play.

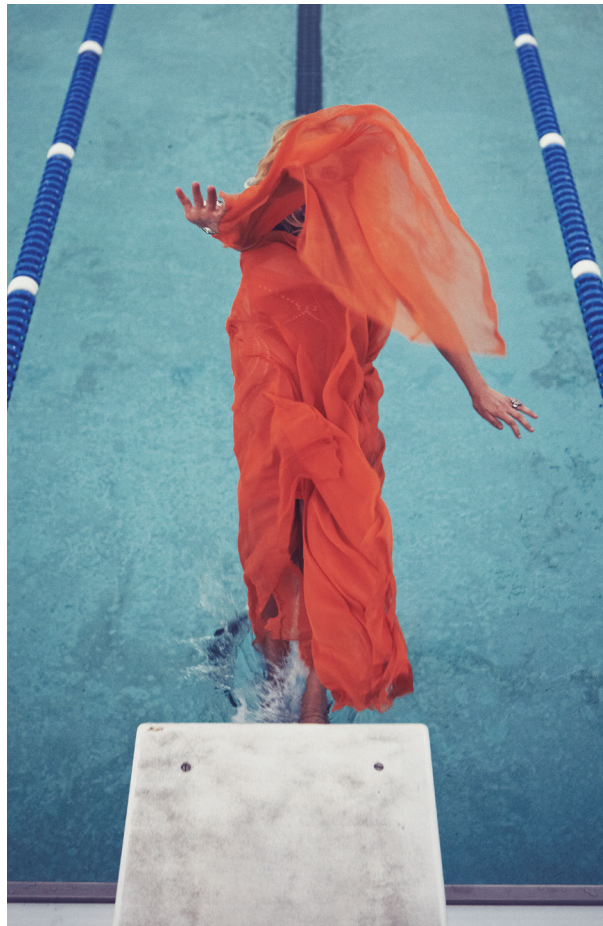
She used to cut class to sing in the stairwells. When Jonesy, the janitor, would catch her, he'd sing with her. The two eventually sang a duet together at a school recital.

Cut to post college with music degree in hand. Elise was in Myrtle Beach and knew she had to get out, so she quit her band, broke her lease, dumped her boyfriend, grabbed her dog, drove to Charleston during Hurricane Ernesto and booked herself a gig at Blind Tiger that night. She found her niche at places like The Pour House- which remains her favorite spot to play in town. She jokes about buying the place next door to one establishment where

management treated her and fellow musicians poorly and calling it "Oh, Snap!" Sweet revenge.

She starts to cry.

She's talking about the other Idols and how she was a role model and a mom and a musician and a friend. They're her family. She *trusts* them. And now she's saying goodbye as the tour ends. She tells me Heejune said it best: "It's not like we're going to miss each other; it's going to be like, 'Where's my arm? Where's my leg?'"



Elise finds inspiration in that camaraderie. "I'm trying to do what I love and inspire other people to do the same." And of course, whether it's the other Idols or the kids in her classroom, it all comes full circle. You inspire others and, in turn, inspire yourself. "We all kind of need each other in a way," she says.

Right now, she's contemplating her album, which she says will be soulful with rock elements. First song she's written for it? "Under Attack" - I will not bend / I will not break.

This is a woman who daydreams of opening a school to help kids find confidence through art. She's a person who is terrified of trusting people ("I've been screwed over in relationships, by best friends...those people know me and deliberately did those things to me. Imagine people who don't even know you personally, and your whole life and career is in their hands.") and only knows that going back to wedding singing isn't an option. She would rather evolve constantly than stay in one great point in her life, regardless of the certain fear that comes with that.

She's someone whose greatest fear is being misunderstood.

Someone who knows she has something...the same something possessed by Steven Tyler and Stevie Nicks.

"There's something I can't put my finger on, but whatever they have, I have it too. I don't know what it is, but it's something."