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**The Come-Up: Sabrina Carpenter on Ghosting,
Grieving & Growing Up**

World, meet girl. Sabrina Carpenter is putting her Disney days — and her teens — behind her with a new album and a new outlook.

Sabrina Carpenter has turned the Toronto set of her Refinery29 photo shoot into her own mini music video. She's laying on the white studio floor as the photographer, camera in hand, hovers above her. Carpenter is gracefully voguing and lip synching into the lens every word of "Keep On" by Kehlani. The playlist is curated to her likes (Beyoncé, Christina Aguilera, SZA, etc.) and she bounces through the set barefoot, cracking jokes with the crew and exuding the confidence of someone who has been dancing around photoshoots since her early teens.

When she and I meet I go in for the handshake while she goes for the embrace. "Sorry, I'm a hugger," she says, laughing, her deep voice belying the former Disney star's barely-5-foot stature. She's wearing Look #4 of the day, an ankle-grazing pink pleated skirt paired with a neon green and purple turtleneck. I tell her she's way more composed than I was as a shy 20-year-old, and she deadpans, "I'm an actress. That's what I want you to think."

If Carpenter is faking her maturity, I can't tell. She keeps up her poise for most of the five-hour photo shoot (she fits us in on her day off from filming the Netflix dance film, *Work It*), breaking only when she's huddled in a corner with her sister, Sarah, giggling at videos on her phone in between takes. When she's back in front of the camera, the multi-hyphenate sings along to tracks from her new album, *Singular: Act II*, which sways between boastful, playful pop, and soulful confessions about anxiety. "The truth is, I'm stuck in the middle of somewhere between 'what is going on?' and, 'I have everything under control,'" she says of her hectic present day.



Later, when we move to a quiet coffee shop (it's closed, but we crash the empty space anyway) attached to the studio, the hairstylist has unclipped her long blonde extensions, and Carpenter has changed from her brightly-colored photoshoot looks to a tattered, cropped vintage Harley Davidson T-shirt, baggy high-waisted Reformation jeans, and her Balenciaga "dad shoes." The outfit makes her look even younger than 20. "I'm like 12," she quips.

In the current music landscape, Carpenter is the shiny counterpart to stripped-down anti-celebs [Maggie Rogers](#) and [Billie Eilish](#). Her music has more of a '90s R&B feel than both the folk-leaning Rogers and goth Eilish. When I ask her how a white girl from suburban Pennsylvania sings with such soul, she says, "My mom is from Philly!" and cites Etta James and Whitney Houston as early influences. Carpenter comes off as polished and self-assured, the prototypical pop star you'd expect from a Disney kid too young to remember a time before Britney and Christina's Billboard dominance in their respective primes. That image is why, Carpenter says, she went deeper on this album.

The track that could be its thesis statement is "Exhale," which hints at Carpenter's desire to do away with the veneer she'd put up on earlier records. She sings, "listen to the labels, listen to the man/ Try to keep a sense of knowing who I am/ I try to be an angel but I don't think I can / Think I'm reaching my limits." Carpenter says her breaking point happened because of her fans.

"I realized my fans talk so openly with me about what they're going through," she says fidgeting with her sleeve. "I get super personal messages, and they'll come to me in meet and greets and tell me what's happening in their lives, and there I was just trying to be this glossy pop star. That's not realistic."



Carpenter's career beginnings are very Gen-Z. She grew up in East Greenville, PA, and at age 10, she placed third in a reality singing competition called [The Next Miley Cyrus Project](#) (Cyrus is still an inspiration, but Carpenter looks back on the experience with utter embarrassment: "I didn't even know how to brush my eyebrows upwards!"). Then, she started posting videos on YouTube after her dad built her a purple recording studio in a closet of their basement ("kind of like where Harry Potter would live if he lived in my house"). From there, she landed a few recurring roles in various TV series, but it was booking Disney Channel's [Girl Meets World](#) in 2013, where she played the brash best friend, Mya, to Rowan Blanchard's cheery Riley Matthews, that put her on the same career trajectory as the superstars that came before her. With a hit show and corresponding songs climbing the Radio Disney charts, Carpenter joined the long list of singing/acting celebs who got famous from Disney Channel shows like Cyrus, Selena Gomez, Zendaya, and Demi Lovato.

On social media platforms, where people are arguably the harshest, Carpenter is exposed to love and hate from millions. "Eighteen fucking million," she says her number of [Instagram followers](#). "Half of them are ghost accounts, let's be real." Carpenter copes with the attention and her anxiety by frequently posting online, then refusing to look at the comments. "I post something on Twitter, and then I literally jump into the ocean. [My fans are] like, 'Can you please stay?' but sometimes, I don't want to know what [fans are] thinking."

Her followers have a lot of thoughts on Carpenter's relationships – platonic and romantic. In terms of the latter, Carpenter laughs off rumors she ever dated Shawn Mendes, but cops to having a Bradley on her list of exes (*Good Luck Charlie* star Bradley Steven Perry). She jokes about the rest of her love life: "I've been secretly married for eight years, nobody knows. I have a kid."





Carpenter's favorite method of deflection is sarcasm; she's cagey about her dating habits but is an open book when it comes to her best friends and older sisters, Sarah, Shannon and her half-sister, Cayla. She's closest with Sarah, 22, who has her sister's face and travels with Sabrina as her backup singer and jill-of-all-trades. "You know that person in your life that does just about everything you can think of?" is how Carpenter describes her sister's job on the road, as Sarah listens in behind an adjacent wall and laughs. "I don't know how long she's going to want to hang around me – I'm quite annoying – but for now it's working."

Carpenter talks about her other best friend (a very important title to dole out at 20), [The Act star Joey King](#) like she's a sister, too. [King was nominated for her first Emmy recently](#), and Carpenter knew the accolade was coming before King did. "She was like, 'No, it's not going to happen.' I was like, 'You're a dumb bitch.'"

Calling a friend "a dumb bitch" affectionately is something Carpenter's character in *The Hate U Give* might do, but that's where the similarities end. Carpenter played Hailey, the racist white girlfriend of Amandla Stenberg's Starr Carter in the 2018 YA adaptation about Black Lives Matter and police brutality. Carpenter says the role was strategic move for her first major acting role post-Disney. "I think it's very easy for people to look at kids that come from Disney and see them as a face and not really a voice," she says. "I wanted my fans to be able to learn something from something that I did."

Carpenter is learning as she goes. Along with a frenetic schedule that doesn't allow her to sleep much (she's currently executive producing and starring in *Work It*, developing an upcoming big screen adaptation of [The Distance From Me To You](#) another YA property) with Danielle Fishel, and working on her fourth studio album), Carpenter is also dealing with an ongoing lawsuit by former managers (her song "Sue Me" is about the legal battle), and coping with the devastating loss of her late friend and fellow Disney alum, [Cameron Boyce](#). Carpenter says working through her grief has been the hardest part.



“It doesn't feel real yet,” she’s holding back tears, visibly shaken by the mention of Boyce. “All I can say about him is that he was more special than anybody could comprehend.” Carpenter says she’s still trying to make sense of the tragedy while juggling the responsibilities of #adulting, and coming to terms with the end of her teen years.

“When you're younger, you think it's a lot worse than it is,” Carpenter sighs. “Then everybody's like, ‘wait till you get to your 20s.’ Then you get to your 20s, and you're like, ‘ohhhh.’”

Carpenter is still looking ahead with equal parts optimism and uncertainty. One day, she hopes to join the small list of entertainers who have won an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and a Tony. “I think that if [an EGOT] comes with the projects I put out with heart and passion, that'd be lit.” She pauses. “No one's going to say that in 50 years,” Carpenter is instantly regretting her choice of words. “Can you imagine someone reading a Wikipedia quote from me: *“I'd love to get an EGOT one day. That'd be lit.”*”

