

On page 12 of the Rulebook of Professional Journalism it states in big, bold print "In the pursuit of real journalism, do not under any circumstances fall in love with your subject matter. Real, objective journalism cannot be carried out if the interviewer has fallen under the spell of the interviewee." Well that's easy for you to write Mr Rulebook writer. You obviously haven't met Cassandra Ventura, known to the public as Cassie. Well, to hell with the rulebook. I never much cared for rules. I'm smitten and there's nothing I can do about.

Please let me explain what exactly has transpired here. I have been the model journalist for the past 12 years. I have interviewed huge stars from across the worlds of sport, music and politics. I have never turned up late for an interview. My copy has always been delivered on time. I have come away disappointed, intrigued and occasionally inspired by the people I have met. But I have never ever let my emotions run away with me. I have never ever fallen for the interviewee emotionally. And then Tappy called. Tappy is Taponessa Mavunga, one of the sweetest people involved in the music industry. She works at Atlantic and having dealt with her for our Lupe issue she suggested Cassie would make an excellent cover. I mulled it over. There was little doubt the single *Me & U* was hot. It had broken the

top ten and was being played constantly on the various radio stations we had on in the office. But I had yet to see Cassie in 'the flesh' and remained in a state of limbo. Then I saw the video and my heart started racing. Of course she could carry a cover. But I needed a trick. Something that would make even the most casual of observers look on the cover of our magazine and say "wow!". I got thinking, came up with a plan and put it to Tappy. We (for we, see me and Sai) were planning a SexyBack issue and wondered how Cassie would feel about gracing the cover wearing nothing but a bra and a smile? Hey, it doesn't hurt to ask huh?

Fast forward a month and Cassie is standing in front of me in a bra, knickers and a pair of heels. She gives me a semi-twirl and asks me a question. What she said, word for word, is this: "Is this outfit alright?" I melt. The rulebook flies out of the window. Over the next four hours, my knees tremble, my heart flutters, my words trip over my tongue. I try to get a grip. Jeez, I have seen many a pretty girl before. What the hell is happening here? For fucks sake Paul, get a grip! Oops, I swore. Cassie will never date me now. Over before it started; me and that foul East London mouth of mine. Always getting me into trouble. Cassie is a sweet girl. Sexy but cute. Naughty but nice. What she isn't is a bad girl. Swearing and all that nasty stuff is not her bag. She'll leave the hoochie coochie stuff to the Southern gals.

She's a good girl, who over a glass of juice in her hotel room will tell me that she went to a Catholic boarding school on a scholarship.

"My problem is that I internalise the criticisms and am too hard on myself."

Worked hard and made good grades. She never ran with a bad crowd and she started modelling when she was 12. She has never been in trouble with law, well except for the time a police car pulled her

over because she forgot to put her headlights on. And even he was so smitten he just waved her on with on the gentlest of warnings.

As she talks it dawns on me I could listen to her all day. Her voice: polite, soft, girlish, excitable and sexy. She giggles often. ▶



VEST ARROGANT CAT, SHORTS ARROGANT CAT, SHOES RED OR DEAD, NECKLACE H&M, BRACELET BY DIVA, EARRINGS BY H&M



HOODED JUMPER BY UNCONDITIONAL, BELT BY TOM WOLFE, SHOES BY RED OR DEAD, NECKLACE BY TOM WOLFE, EARRINGS BY FREEDOM, BANGLE FREEDOM.

She smiles all the time. I would hate to see her cry. It would be like the worst sight ever. She tells me about the time she almost cried when someone at her last modelling agency told her to lose some weight. Cassie is a size UK 8 at tops. If she became one of those size zero freaks it would be a complete nightmare. She also tells me how she's come close to crying hearing the whispers from the haters who question her voice and her talent. "My problem is that I internalise the criticisms and am too hard on myself. But that's just the way I am." Her inner circle is close. Mum, dad and one brother, a few tight friends and no boyfriend. So in the name of true friendship I offer my services. In the shoulder-to-cry-on kinda way. Cassie, anytime you wanna talk, I'm here.

The smile returns. She's smiling because she's laughing at the irony of her, the good girl from the straight, conservative State of Connecticut being signed to a label called Bad Boy. Who'd have thought that? It happened like this: having heard her song, an early working of *Me & U* being played on heavy rotation in the super hip New York eatery Bungalow 8, P. Diddy knew he had to have her on his roster. Only trouble was she was already signed to her mentor and producer Ryan Leslie's label. But money talks and P. Diddy has plenty. Within 24 hours the girl was his. He got Ryan back into the studio, got Cassie to work on her vocals and they turned around one of the year's hottest albums within a matter of weeks. "We put together a really good album" says Cassie. "One I'm really proud of. I learnt early on that I am not Faith Evans, I am not Aretha Franklin, I am not Mariah Carey whose vocals are out of this world. But one day people will come out and say, 'she really can sing.'" And the prettiest 20 year old in the world goes on to say, "People love the album because at the end of the day it's about the music. I have focused on the fact that the album is versatile. It's not in one corner. At the end of the day, we really made a good album and people can say these things about me but I don't care." And then it dawns on me; that's why I have fallen for her. Beauty, brains, talent and inner strength. My kind of girl.

She's now living the high life and because she's been brought up well, she's taking it all in and being nice to just about everybody she comes into contact with because she knows how quickly it all can dis-

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appear. "This is my first time to the UK and to many of the major European cities like Paris and Amsterdam and I could really see myself living over here." And with that I start thinking ten steps ahead. Life with Cassie in Hackney. Stop it Paul. Hey, at school they always said I was a dreamer. I snap to. Just in time to hear Cassie talking about prepping for her US tour. "I'm hoping to take it international" she says. She's caught the bug. The fans, the paparazzi, the hotels, the travel. She's loving it. She only inked her deal in March this year, and it all seems like a blur. She wants a moment to take it all in but understands you just gotta make the most of it. There are thousands of girls out there who would trade places with her in a heartbeat. But the catch is none of them will be as pretty as her. Not even close.

