

LIRA ON...

... **social media**  
You can have 50 good comments and one painful one and it can be cataclysmic. You poison yourself with that one comment. I deal with it practically. Stop magnifying the negative. One person, versus 50. What is the ratio? Ignore and delete.

... **living abroad**  
I love the idea of living in Europe, but I feel that I add value by being here. I really want to tour around the world, which is challenging with the rand/dollar.

... **children**  
It took me a while to realise that children are not a priority. I am so fulfilled, there is nothing missing. We can plan our year, nothing comes in the way of it. I don't want a family more than what I have right now.

... **friends**  
I have had many friends who broke up with me. They watched me struggle to build this, and then made decisions in their life that did not enjoy seeing me in the space of success. Saying that, I have my sisterhood. Girlfriends since age 12 and a cousin. They keep me grounded and protected. We centre each other. We go away on holidays, book a house in Zimbabwe for a week, drink champagne, dance and connect, sans responsibilities.

... **what music means**  
What I learnt about music growing up was that, generally, adults were hard. Until the music came on. There was instant transformation. They would grab kids and start dancing, a gentleness and love that came from listening to the collective township sound, from someone's big speakers. It was an outlet, a comforter, hope, that brought families together.

... **her look**  
Mariam Makeba taught me that to be natural and African was acceptable. She didn't put on a wig.

... **spirituality**  
I am not religious but every day, I acknowledge myself and pause and appreciate. If you don't take responsibility for setting your mind every single day, how will your life work?

I sit there and go: I like my husband. I am healthy. I still get to do what I love. I had to make an effort to get myself out of being constantly unsure, self-doubting, insecure. Those were practised habits.

Spirituality is just being aware. Musicians suffer the greatest insecurity. "Like me, like me, like me." We need constant validation. You will never feel good if you don't know that not everyone will love you. Look at Beyoncé. Many people don't like her. It does not stop her from being a goddess.



# How Lira found her voice

Finally comfortable with herself, Lira talks to **Shanthini Naidoo** about running her own career, loving her man and getting over her carb addiction

LIRATO Molapo makes a dramatic entrance in her classic Porsche. She drives fast, then parks conspicuously near the entrance of a trendy Craighall lunch spot.

Lira, 37, songstress, emerges. Graceful, the low-slung car makes her limbs seem more lanky, long. An elegant, slim giraffe outstanding in a concrete jungle.

Big smiles for the waitrons, she waves a greeting as if she is meeting a girlfriend for a catchup.

Let's talk.  
But first, some crispy, spicy Korean chicken to break the ice. "It is good," she says in that gravelly, full-bodied voice that makes everything sound better. Lira has just launched her sixth album, *Born Free*, under her new label Otarel. It is doing well and she is quite visible at the moment, her face is on at least four magazine covers (including this one).

The album credits lie mostly with her and Robin Kohl, her producer, manager and husband.

"We are celebrating seven years of marriage," she grins. The itch is not evident; she hasn't heard of it.

"I love being married, he is just ... fun. We live, work and play together. It is easier than you might think, and we are very invested in each other, the business of us. It helps that he looks his best now. This is my favourite version of him."

She rolls her eyes and makes a funny face. "He dresses so much better now." Full-on laughter.

Lira clears her throat, also a pretty sound. "I feel like he likes himself a lot more, which is ... we are all struggling with loving ourselves, aren't we?"

She selects a seared tuna salad for her main.

"I usually eat clean, quite healthy and fresh. I am going through my fourth food evolution."

The evolutions have followed her personal journey.

As a young girl from Daveyton township on the East Rand, her grandmother was all about finding comfort in carbs. "They were really meals to get by. Not very nutritional, more filling. But that's not to say it was not delicious. Samp and beans are my favourite. My ultimate."

When she was 11, she moved in with her parents for the first time in her life. "That was a huge shock, because my dad was so health conscious, he was vegetarian. We had filtered water, lots of vegetables, I remember eating nuts ... almonds. And we were never allowed to eat and drink at the same time. We would drink after a meal."

With college "and limited resources", carbs made a comeback. "I had such a huge appetite. I could eat 13 slices of bread as a 19-year-old. Thir-teen!" She nearly falls off her chair with giggles.

The fourth phase, which she discovered as a musician, is healthy, lactose- and wheat-free.

"I am again predominantly vegetarian. I love vegetables. We grow about 80 different edible greens and herbs in our garden at our new home." It is a space to tune out, away from work and the studio.

"My body is happiest like this now. It feels good on the inside, out," she beats her chest lightly. She says she would not recognise herself if she walked past college Lira, the carb-loader.

Speaking in lyrics, she says: "I would pause and tell her, 'Don't beat yourself up. It will be hard, but quitting is harder than continuing. Don't sabotage yourself or your efforts, they will come to being'."

"And I would tell her it is easier to be herself than what they want you to be. The natural hair, slim body, it is all okay. You don't have to put on, you don't have to try to be outside of yourself."

"When I started out, I didn't feel I was enough. Everyone was curvy and wore weaves. Miriam Makeba inspired me to accept that this is beautiful."

Lira the child was an early starter, learning to read from her

**My body is happiest like this now. It feels good on the inside, out**

older cousins at four or five.

"I avoided the spotlight on all platforms, no sport, or singing at school. I was pushing academics."

She qualified as an accountant, hated it, and took unsteady steps into the entertainment industry. Discovered nearly 15 years ago by Arthur Mafokate, she was signed to the Kwaito record label, but left after a year.

She felt tainted, plagued by rumours, stolen lyrics, affected by, but not involved in, the drugs- and sex-mad industry that put girls in raunchy outfits.

"I was incredibly guarded and fearful of men. I tread carefully but there was a time when a lot of what the public saw was not me. I didn't like the dancers, half-naked and jiving on stage. I would be privy to the stories the guys shared about them. It was horrifying. Even my first album cover was not approved by me. The make-up artist came in and plied me with so much stuff ... I decided that was the last time I let anyone take charge of my career."

**My stage performance was pathetic! You could tell I was not confident**

But first she had to fight what she says was an inability to perform on stage.

"My stage performance was pathetic! You could tell I was not confident. I remember I randomly saw a video of Michael Jackson. He was this tiny person on a huge, empty stage. Holding a pose. He moved just an inch, and people screamed and screamed."

"He commanded the room. That is when I understood about what was confidence. The energy was bigger than his physical body. That is the only way to do it, to be comfortable with my skin. It helped me to affirm myself on stage."

Fast forward to today and she is a world-renowned Afro-soul artist, author, a judge on the South African version of *The Voice*.

It was her voice that broke through all those barriers: strong, soulful and captivating.

"Often I sit there and think, where did I get the audacity or stupidity to do this?"

"It could have gone any way. It didn't really make sense because

nobody sings for a living, surely? But I was unfulfilled as an accountant. I knew I was an artist in every way possible."

It helped her to leave her vocation, even though she faced bankruptcy and lived with her parents again.

"I had to fulfil this need, even if it was not guaranteed. I had to pay a tribute to what I wanted to be, and do. That was the key to how I navigated my life. And suddenly life was responding."

"I realised that your mind-set is what influences your life. It sounds like a cliché, but it is so true. I am proof of it. I was always picking up the right book at the right time, to help guide me."

The plates are cleared and we are on to a fresh vegetable juice, with ginger. No dessert.

She says the album is about her path. "In all these journeys, I realised what I was looking for was freedom. To dress and look how I wanted, to marry who I wanted, in my core. It speaks about freedom as a state of being, not necessarily a political thing."

There is no way to live, but freely, she says.

"I make it a point to enjoy everything about the life I live. Life must be a pleasure. From waking up in the morning, if I want to dance for half an hour to exercise, I do. I read a lot, but I like everything I read. If I can't get into it, just because it is a popular book, I don't read it."

"We travel a lot. Adventure holidays. Iceland, the Virgin Islands, it must be a challenge. When we feel like life is becoming too much, that everything is a schlep, we are not enjoying ourselves, we get out, quickly. It might even be a game of golf. That is five hours of no cellphones, a change of scenery and pace."

One of her passions is mentoring youth and women. She has adopted an arts school in Daveyton. "I have always wanted to be a role model. A child must say I helped them improve their lives, showed them they can do anything, be it in the business world or creative world. It works wonders just to share. That is my message. That dreams really can come true."

Expressing herself with her body, she swirls around in her chair.

"I have to stop and look at myself and ask, is this for real? Something crazy is happening and I am excited to be alive."

She stops. "And you know, I am comfortable in my madness." **LS**



EARNING HER STRIPES: The young girl from Daveyton who focused on her academics has grown up, is happily married, drives a Porsche and recently released her sixth album. Lira in a jacket-and-trouser suit from Emporio Armani and a version of the traditional Ndebele neck rings. The suit jacket goes for R8 500 and the trousers for R8 395, Emporio Armani 011 268 0219 PICTURE: Photographer: Steve Tancel/Red Hot Ops. Fashion Director: SHARON BECKER. Fashion Assistant: KHOMOTSO MOLOTO. Photographer's Assistant: LESEDI MOTHOGAE. Model: LIRA. Makeup: LESLEY WHITBY/LAMPOST USING MAC. Fashion Intern: LYDIA WESSELS