

Rob Haskell

Selena Gomez on Instagram Fatigue, Good Mental Health, and Stepping Back From the Limelight

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On an unusually wet and windy evening in Los Angeles, Selena Gomez shows up at my door with a heavy bag of groceries. We've decided that tonight's dinner will be a sort of tribute to the after-church Sunday barbecues she remembers from her Texan childhood. I already have chicken simmering in green salsa, poblano peppers blackening on the flames of the stove, and red cabbage wilting in a puddle of lime juice. All we need are Gomez's famous cheesy potatoes – so bad they're good, she promises. She sets down her Givenchy purse and brings up, in gaudy succession, a frozen package of Giant Eagle Potatoes O'Brien, a can of Campbell's Cream of Chicken soup, a bag of shredded "Mexican cheese," and a squat plastic canister of French's Crispy Fried Onions.

"I bet you didn't think we were going to get this real," she says, and when I tell her that real isn't the first word that springs to mind when faced with these ingredients, she responds with the booming battle-ax laugh that offers a foretaste of Gomez's many enchanting incongruities.

But real is precisely what I was expecting from the 24-year-old Selena, just as her 110 million Instagram followers (Selenators, as they're known) have come to expect it. Of course, celebrity's old codes are long gone, MGM's untouchable eggshell glamour having given way to the "They're Just Like Us!" era of documented trips to the gas station and cellulite captured by telephoto lenses. But Gomez and her ilk have gone further still, using their smartphones to generate a stardom that seems to say not merely "I'm just like you" but "I am you."

"People so badly wanted me to be authentic," she says, laying a tortilla in sizzling oil, "and when that happened, finally, it was a huge release. I'm not different from what I put out there. I've been very vulnerable with my fans, and sometimes I say things I shouldn't. But I have to be honest with them. I feel that's a huge part of why I'm where I am." Gomez traces her shift toward the unfiltered back to a song she released in 2014 called "The Heart Wants What It Wants," a ballad about loving a guy she knows is bad news. The title derives from a letter written by Emily Dickinson, though Woody Allen reintroduced the phrase when he used it to describe his relationship with Soon-Yi Previn. We can assume that Gomez is referring here to Justin Bieber, with whom she ended a three-year relationship at around the time the song debuted.

If you are over 30 and find yourself somewhat mystified by Gomez's fame, unable to attach it to any art object – apart from several inescapable pop songs and a cameo in *The Big Short* in which, as herself, she explains synthetic collateralized debt obligations – then you might wish to watch the video for "The Heart Wants What It Wants." (You will be late to the party; it received more than nine million views in the first 24 hours following its release.) Before the music begins, we hear Gomez's voice as if from a recorded psychotherapy session, ruminating over a betrayal. "Feeling so confident, feeling so great about myself," she says, her voice breaking, "and then it'd just be completely shattered by one thing. By something so stupid." Sobs. "But then you make me feel crazy. You make me feel like it's my fault." Is this acting? Is it a HIPAA violation? Either way, there is magic in the way it makes you feel as if you've just shared in her suffering. Pay dirt for a Selenator.

Gomez queues up a playlist – Dolly Parton, Kenny Rogers – and back in the kitchen, there is a chile relleno casserole to assemble, green enchiladas to roll, and her cheesy potatoes to mix together. As I slip an

apron over her mane of chocolate-brown hair, for which Pantene has paid her millions, and tie it around
40 her tiny waist, I wonder whether her legions have felt for years the same sharp pang of protectiveness that
I'm feeling at present. Even as she projects strength and self-assuredness, Gomez is not stingy with frailty.
"I've cried onstage more times than I can count, and I'm not a cute crier," she says. Last summer, after the
North American and Asian legs of her "Revival" tour, with more than 30 concerts remaining, she abruptly
shut things down and checked into a psychiatric facility in Tennessee. [...] The cause, she says, was not an
45 addiction or an eating disorder or burnout, exactly.

"Tours are a really lonely place for me," she explains. "My self-esteem was shot. I was depressed,
anxious. I started to have panic attacks right before getting onstage, or right after leaving the stage.
Basically I felt I wasn't good enough, wasn't capable. I felt I wasn't giving my fans anything, and they could
see it – which, I think, was a complete distortion. I was so used to performing for kids. At concerts I used to
50 make the entire crowd raise up their pinkies and make a pinky promise never to allow anybody to make
them feel that they weren't good enough. Suddenly I have kids smoking and drinking at my shows, people
in their 20s, 30s, and I'm looking into their eyes, and I don't know what to say. I couldn't say, 'Everybody,
let's pinky-promise that you're beautiful!' It doesn't work that way, and I know it because I'm dealing with
the same shit they're dealing with. What I wanted to say is that life is so stressful, and I get the desire to
55 just escape it. But I wasn't figuring my own stuff out, so I felt I had no wisdom to share. And so maybe I
thought everybody out there was thinking, 'This is a waste of time'."

On August 15, Gomez uploaded a photo of almost baroque drama: her body collapsed on the stage,
bathed in beatific light. Whether this was agony or ecstasy, it drew more than a million comments from
fans (who have handles like "selena_is_my_life_forever"). It would be her last Instagram post for more
60 than three months. She flew to Tennessee, surrendered her cell phone, and joined a handful of other young
women in a program that included individual therapy, group therapy, even equine therapy. "You have no
idea how incredible it felt to just be with six girls," she says, "real people who couldn't give two shits about
who I was, who were fighting for their lives. It was one of the hardest things I've done, but it was the best
thing I've done." She stayed for 90 days, making her first post-treatment appearance last November at the
65 American Music Awards, where she collected the trophy for Favorite Pop/Rock Female Artist and gave a
tearful speech about her struggles; it quickly went viral. [...]

Doll-like and startled in pictures but almost breathtakingly at ease in person, Gomez was once described
by her good friend Taylor Swift as "both 40 years old and seven years old." She grew up in Grand Prairie,
Texas, raised by a single mother who was sixteen when she was born. Gomez remembers being asked to
70 feel between the cushions in the car for change so that they could buy Styrofoam cups of ramen. But at age
seven, after a few years on the pageant circuit, she landed a role on the children's show *Barney & Friends*,
which shot in Dallas and recruited talent locally. By twelve she was one of Disney's young players, plucked
out of thousands of hopefuls. At thirteen she moved to Los Angeles with her mother and stepfather, and
the following year Disney gave her the lead in *Wizards of Waverly Place*, a sitcom about a family of wizards
75 who own a downtown Manhattan restaurant. The show was a hit, and Disney did what Disney does,
fanning Gomez's talent across music and movies, with her mother, Mandy Teefey, continuing to act as her
manager. (Gomez hired a Hollywood management firm in 2014, after her first mental-health crisis, but she
continues to develop projects with her mother and prizes her opinion above all others.) "I worked with
Disney for four years," Gomez says. "It's a very controlled machine. They know what they represent, and
80 there was, 100 percent, a way to go about things."

No child star enjoys easy passage through the morass of adolescence, and Gomez struggled to shed her
blandly perky *Wizards* persona. "For a guy there's a way to rebel that can work for you," she believes. "But
for a woman, that can backfire. It's hard not to be a cliché, the child star gone wrong. I did respect my fans
and what I had, but I was also figuring out what I was passionate about and how far I was willing to go." [...]

85 Gomez has [...] been in the recording studio off and on, and in February she released “It Ain’t Me,” a
song cut last November, produced by the Norwegian DJ Kygo. It’s both a dance-floor anthem and a polemic
against dependency and enmeshment. (“Who’s gonna walk you through the dark side of the morning?” she
sings. “It ain’t me.” A few years back, it might well have been Gomez.) She is collaborating with Coach on a
90 line of accessories, out this fall, and Stuart Vevers, the house’s creative director, recently met with her in
Los Angeles for a bit of brainstorming. “There’s a very warm and inclusive way that Selena has with her
fans,” Vevers says. “That’s the nature of her power. What fashion house wouldn’t want to tap into that?”

There are no movies in the works and no time pressure from her record label. “For a change,” she says,
“it feels like I don’t have to be holding my breath and waiting for somebody to judge a piece of work that
I’m doing. I’m not eager to chase a moment. I don’t think there’s a moment for me to chase.” Gomez
95 currently lives in an Airbnb in the Valley and honestly doesn’t get out much, except for long drives with her
girlfriends: a realtor, a techie, some folks from church. “I think seventeen people have my phone number
right now,” she says. “Maybe two are famous.” She is taking Spanish, which she spoke fluently as a little girl
but lost, in the hope of recording some Spanish-language music in the future. She sees her shrink five days
a week and has become a passionate advocate of Dialectical Behavior Therapy, a technique developed to
100 treat borderline personality disorder that is now used more broadly, with its emphasis on improving
communication, regulating emotions, and incorporating mindfulness practices. “DBT has completely
changed my life,” she says. “I wish more people would talk about therapy. We girls, we’re taught to be
almost too resilient, to be strong and sexy and cool and laid-back, the girl who’s down. We also need to feel
allowed to fall apart.”

105 She has hardly been posting on Instagram. In fact, the app is no longer on her phone, and she doesn’t
even have the password to her own account. (It’s now in the possession of her assistant.) She sometimes
fantasizes about disappearing from social media altogether. “As soon as I became the most followed
person on Instagram, I sort of freaked out,” Gomez says. “It had become so consuming to me. It’s what I
woke up to and went to sleep to. I was an addict, and it felt like I was seeing things I didn’t want to see, like
110 it was putting things in my head that I didn’t want to care about. I always end up feeling like shit when I
look at Instagram. Which is why I’m kind of under the radar, ghosting it a bit.”

Well, not entirely under the radar. A few days after we met, Gomez flew to Italy with her new beau, The
Weeknd, and the paparazzi did not fail to notice. (Neither did The Weeknd’s ex, the model Bella Hadid, who
took to social media and promptly unfollowed Gomez.) When I ask Gomez about the romance, she tells me
115 that everything she has said about her relationships in the past has come back to bite her, and that she will
never do it again.

“Oh, Mylanta!” she wails, watching her cheesy potatoes travel around the table, a whiff of the simpler
joys of home. “Look, I love what I do, and I’m aware of how lucky I am, but – how can I say this without
sounding weird? I just really can’t wait for people to forget about me.”

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