

ICONS OF
CHANGE

3

Born to rule

*'My identity exists without the labels, it's already there.
A label is just a name for it' – Amandla Stenberg*

Interview **Lotte Jeffs** Photography **Beau Greal** Styling **Alison Edmond**

HERE'S HOW IT GOES DOWN AT KITCHEN 24, a late-night diner in West Hollywood where at 5am Amandla Stenberg and her crew are having breakfast after dancing all night at a party. A guy in a back-to-front baseball cap comes over to their table. 'You know Flo Rida?' he says, gesturing to the rapper who is sitting in a corner booth. 'Yes,' says Amandla, she is familiar. 'He wants to know if you're a singer.' 'Yes...' she says without mentioning that she also plays violin, has worked with super producer and musician Dev Hynes and released an EP with her own band Honeywater (currently on hiatus) '...I sing.' Her friends are used to such intrusions; it's not just the 17-year-old's 863,000 Instagram followers who want a piece of her. She's been hit up by Beyoncé, Solange, Gloria Steinem, and says even Oscar-winner Brie Larson 'messages me all the time'. It's no surprise that when Flo's guy claims his boss wants her 'to sing on a track with him' she politely declines and carries on eating breakfast without the faintest of side-eye in Flo's direction.

Amandla and her best friend Samia Hampton, a 20-year-old unsigned model, are regaling Amandla's mum Karen and I with this anecdote over brunch in Downtown LA. 'Oh, what's that Flo Rida song I like?' asks Karen, missing the point. 'My House... I was just dancing around the kitchen to that song.' The girls roll their eyes – so not cool.

Since playing Rue in *The Hunger Games* back in 2012, Amandla, an 'artist, actor and activist', has joined the likes of Willow Smith, Rowan Blanchard, Zendaya and Tavi Gevinson in being the voice of a politicised generation speaking out on race, gender and sexuality, all using social media to control their own images and the messages they share with fans. In the past two years, Amandla's growing fame has been entirely of her own making. Her vlogs and essays span cultural appropriation, identity, racism and feminism, and have seen her gain hundreds >

EMBELLISHED
CASHMERE COAT AND
EMBELLISHED VELVET
TOP, BOTH DOLCE
& GABBANA. GOLD AND
DIAMOND EAR CUFF
(WORN THROUGHOUT),
REPOSSI. GOLD
NOSE RING (WORN
THROUGHOUT),
AMANDLA'S OWN





THIS PAGE
 EMBELLISHED WOOL-
 MIX COAT, KENZO.
 EMBELLISHED
 SILK-CREPE DRESS,
 MARY KATRANTZOU.
 VELVET-MIX SANDALS,
 ALTUZARRA. GOLD
 AND AGATE EARCUFF
 (WORN THROUGHOUT),
 STUDIO URIBE. SILVER
 EARRINGS, GINA
 MELOSI. NYLON SOCKS,
 SOCKSHOP **OPPOSITE**
PAGE RAYON-MIX DRESS,
 MOSCHINO. SILVER
 EARCUFF, APPLES
 AND FIGS. AMANDLA'S
 LEFT HAND, FROM TOP:
 SILVER AND QUARTZ
 RING, AND RHODIUM
 AND ANGELITE RING,
 BOTH STUDIO URIBE.
 AMANDLA'S RIGHT
 HAND: SILVER AND
 DIAMOND RING,
 MAHA LOZI

Beau Gately





EMBELLISHED
BLUE DENIM SHIRT,
AND WHITE PEARL-MIX
NECKLACE, BOTH MIU
MIU. FAUX-PEARL EAR
CUFF, JANE KØNIG.
LONG SILVER EARRING,
BECCA JEWELLERY
FOR PETER JENSEN.
GOLD AND DIAMOND
RING (TOP), MARIA
FRANCESCA PEPE.
GOLD RING, EDGE
OF EMBER. SILVER
HOOP EARRING,
AMANDLA'S OWN

Beau Greal

of thousands of followers, famous fans and be named by *Time Magazine* as one of 2015's most influential teens.

TODAY HER HAIR IS OUT; there's a natural streak of white at the back like the secret mark of a superhero ('It wants to be seen,' says her hairdresser Larry Sims of it later, as he attends to her curls before the ELLE shoot). She's wearing a bright orange Moschino sweater and flared Asos jeans, embroidered around the left pocket with her surname ('I unpicked the "Amandla" on the other pocket as it was just a bit much,' she admits). As we get into the kind of intellectual debate that I rarely engage in before a couple of glasses of wine, this image of Amandla unpicking her name takes on a great resonance.

She says, 'There's no way you can go about making any social change before you've worked on consciously undoing the messages you've internalised about yourself and other people.' True to her words, she has unpicked everything around her – society, institutions from Hollywood to high school, her sexuality and gender – and now she's very publicly in the process of patching it all together in her own way. It's a joy and an inspiration to witness first-hand, though it no doubt makes her a brilliant yet challenging friend and daughter.

Amandla moved out of home at 16. 'Absolutely I was a teenage cliché, slamming doors, yelling... I had moody, angsty periods of feeling like my parents didn't understand me,' she says. 'But being in this industry means you learn how to navigate adulthood, probably too soon. My mom knew I needed independence, so we thought it would be really good for our relationship for me to live on my own.'

Her mum and Danish-born dad Tom Stenberg ('A record producer in the Seventies – he's crazy!') divorced when she was a baby, but the family remain close and she regularly gets together with both parents and her two half-sisters from her dad's previous marriages.

Karen, a former magazine writer and now a counsellor for the Agape Spiritual Centre in Hollywood, is bursting with pride for her only child but she's no pushy stage mum. Their dynamic is admirably mature and as Amandla

instinctively hops into the front seat of our car on the way to the shoot, while Karen squeezes into the back between me and Samia, it's clear who calls the shots.

When Amandla told the world that she was bisexual via Snapchat, she hadn't exactly spoken to her mum about it first. 'We'd discussed fluidity generally, but not how it related to me.' She was on a roll after the vlog she made for a history assignment about the appropriation of black culture, *Don't Cash Crop On My Cornrows*, had more than a million views on YouTube. She figured her folks would be fine that she was 'queer in someway' and thankfully they were, though I get the sense there may have been some heated debates around the kitchen table about it at the time.

WITH AMANDLA THOUGH, NOTHING IS SIMPLE. 'Bisexual is a word I am not too attached to,' she tells me. 'The label can mean different things but it implies a dichotomy that doesn't take into account trans people. So maybe pansexual is more accurate for me.' I ask if with the increasing number of labels that now exist (pan, non-binary, cis, trans) we've just created more boxes for people to fit themselves into and maybe that's restrictive. She has a pretty smart answer, of course: 'My identity exists without the labels. It's already there – a label is just a name for it. But for some people who are really searching for who they are or feel alienated, then for them finding labels is really important as they feel their identity is validated and they are part of a community'.

I ask Samia, who is in charge of following Amandla around during the shoot with a speaker hooked up to her playlist of Blood Orange songs and 'a new genre of rap music that's all about conscious love', how she identifies: 'Oh, I'm just an amorphous blob floating through space,' she says. Got it.

I came out as gay when I was Amandla's age, but in my day (I'm now 34) grey areas existed. Of course they did, but there was no name for them and that made it harder to accept that any kind of fluidity was real or valid. But anyway, says Amandla, 'humans should be judged on so many more topics than their gender identity.' For the record, she's currently single but admits: 'I've dated guys and I've dated girls and I've dated all kinds of people.'

Coinciding with the fascinating and important conversations about gender and sexuality that young social media stalwarts such as Amandla are thrusting into the mainstream is a highly charged dialogue about race that is largely originating in the US but spreading around the world with hashtags that represent huge issues, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #Carefree and #BlackGirlMagic. I ask that she explains the true meaning behind this idea of 'magic': 'There's a surge on social media of black women claiming their own space and realising that they are beautiful and capable and smart, because those are things that, honestly, black women are not taught to think about themselves. #BlackGirlMagic started becoming a hashtag because black women were fed up of feeling alienated and that they were not beautiful – it was >

a movement that had an emphasis on undoing Eurocentric beauty standards.'

Being 'carefree', she explains, is about rejecting the way black women have been taught to be strong, to be silent, to be very digestible. 'To fit into a mould that is not vibrant or expressive; making yourself smaller and quieter to survive in society. That doesn't make sense because black culture is so inherently vibrant and colourful and expressive.'

But does the seriousness of the message get lost in the medium? 'It is true that when something enters social media it does lose some depth and it becomes easy to feel good about yourself just by doing a single tweet. But a single tweet won't change the actual systems. At the same time, when things enter popular culture in a way that they really start fizzing, it reaches people. I'm sure there are now lots more people in smaller towns who are learning about these things, even if it is on a surface level.'

TO GET TO THE REAL CRUX OF THE ISSUE behind the pithy hashtags though, 'we need to organise,' she says. 'So instead of tweeting or posting, we need to be living it in real life and striving towards very specific goals. I feel like with the #BlackLivesMatter movement in particular – and I'm a huge supporter of it and the women who started it – I'm not sure if there's a particular goal we are striving for. It's difficult as there isn't just one law that's going to fix everything. I feel like something bigger is going to have to happen. I don't know how that is going to manifest and I don't know what my role in it will be, but I just feel like some shift is going to occur – I see this time as being similar to previous civil rights movements.'

Whatever does happen, you can be sure that Amandla will be on the frontline of it. She recently met iconic feminist Gloria Steinem, who told her that sometimes her form of rebellion was just getting up in the morning and going to the deli and asking for a sandwich. 'That really struck me,' Amandla says. 'I think when you are a marginalised person and you are in a society that invalidates you or makes you feel smaller, then the very fact that you are alive is a revolutionary act in itself.'

SHE ALSO SPOKE TO STEINEM ABOUT GROWING UP: 'She told me people are like Russian nesting dolls and your six-year-old self is the smallest doll, then on top of that is your 10-year-old self and on top of that is your 15-year-old self, and that just builds and builds. She explained that we never let go of our younger selves, they are still at our core. That changed my entire thinking about getting older.' It's changed mine now too (thanks Gloria!). Also on hand to offer advice is Beyoncé, who called Amandla out of the blue to ask her to come to New Orleans to be in her visual album *Lemonade*. And yes, it was the 'most exciting phone call in the world ever.'

Amandla stars in a scene in which she sits on a porch looking supremely strong with musical duo Ibeyi, Zendaya and Bey herself. 'I don't see the point of questioning if it's authentic or not,' she says of the conversation around Beyoncé's revolutionary work. 'I don't think she is the kind of artist to cash in on a concept for money's sake. Obviously she's had the experience of black womanhood and of oppression, so it makes sense to me that she would want to bring together women in such an important way.' On set, Beyoncé told Amandla and the other women that they must 'work together and use our collective power in order to change the world.' Amandla says Beyoncé showcased the black female experience in such a beautiful way, she was left wondering, 'Now what do we do?'

There's lots for her to do individually, at least. She's finally graduated from high school and plans to backpack around Europe before taking up a place to study film at NYU. Then there are parts in films including *Where Hands Touch*, about a relationship between an SS officer and a mixed race girl, and *As You Are*, a Nineties-set high school drama. But right now she's enjoying the summer free from the shackles of the school system. I ask if she and her friends ever have fun, or if they're always sitting around like a new breed of beatniks, having intense existential conversations. 'Honestly, yes, it is just like that!' she says. 'One of my really close friends is Willow Smith and whenever we hang out, we go on hikes at night and we just talk.' It's a relief to hear she also loves to dance and go to gigs, and finds it exhausting that when she meets new people who want her to 'explain the gender binary blah blah blah or give a thesis on post-racial consciousness... I would rather get to know people personally and talk about things other than big intellectual topics all the time.' But it's tough, being good at everything. She is so smart, funny and charming; a great actor, singer and dancer (did I mention she also plays classical violin?) that whatever gender she may or may not identify with, she's simply a human being you want to be around.

Her mother tells me a story about taking a three-year-old Amandla to a book signing: 'She had this fairy wand and she went around tapping people on the head with it. I think it's funny because in a way, that's what she still does through her work today.' I can't help but agree – she brings the magic. ■
Follow Amandla on Instagram at @amandlastenberg

COTTON TOP AND WOOL TROUSERS, BOTH ROBERTO CAVALLI. HEMATITE AND AMETHYST BROOCH (WORN AS AN EARRING), AND RHODIUM RING, BOTH STUDIO URIBE. LEATHER NECKLACE), NIZA HUANG. HAIR: LARRY SIMS AT FORWARD ARTISTS. MAKE-UP: LISA STOREY AT THE WALL GROUP USING CHANEL SS16 AND NO.5 BODY CREAM. MANICURE: TRACY CLEMENS AT OPUS BEAUTY