

ALABAMA MUSIC

Chika catches world's ear

Montgomery rapper announces Warner deal, new video

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Alabama rapper Chika's breakout year continues to take her to new heights, with news of a major-label deal and the release of a gently inspirational video and single.

The song, "High Rises," doubtless will provide many with their first impression of Montgomery native Jane Chika Oranika, coming as it does with the backing of Warner Records. But for several years now she has repeatedly shown an ability to capture national and even international attention with snippets of her lyrical free-styling.

So far in 2019, she's been featured in a Calvin Klein ad campaign, appeared on "Jimmy Kimmel Live" and given showcase performances at California's Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival and Alabama's Hangout Music Fest.

There have been signs for a while that all this was on the way. One of the biggest came about a year ago, when she took aim at Kanye West over his affinity for President Donald Trump and his comments suggesting that remaining in slavery had been a choice for its victims. She took West to task, and fiercely, for being out of touch with the realities



Rapper Chika from Montgomery performs at the Hang-out Music Festival in Gulf Shores.
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of life experienced by black Americans who looked up to him as a powerful voice for their hopes and fears. "Now Mr. West take a seat I implore you/ Over time it seems it's gotten harder to ignore you/ You undo the progress of the geniuses before you/ Kim gave you the box and now we know you can afford her/ It don't matter how much you have or you lack/ When that check clears don't forget your children are still black."

That got millions of views and attention far and wide. It wasn't her only turn in the social media spotlight: She's earned nods from the likes of Missy Elliott, Erykah Badu and Jada Pinkett Smith. Billboard noticed her for a take that turned Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You" into an LGBT pride anthem. Essence celebrated her tribute to Nia Wilson, the victim of a stabbing in California that was widely seen as a hate crime.

In short, Chika has shown a flair for getting noticed by all the right people. The process of translating that potency into mainstream commercial success has been a slow and cautious one. Calvin Klein sponsored her at this year's Coachella festival, providing a video for her song "No Squares."

More recently she blew away her fanbase with a two-minute rap titled "My Whole Mood is Blown." In a voice that is somehow both rapid-fire and weary, she talks in the rap about the pressures of being an artist striving for success, the weariness of having her size counted against her, about wanting to be "a regular woman who walks through the world with no weight on her back/ No pun intended/ hell, yes, I'm offended/ my body don't do s--- but rap."

She also says in the clip, "I'm tired of taking the every-

day pain and contorting it into a lesson." It's a confessional that feels as intimate as watching someone admit her deepest doubts to her bedroom mirror.

A key part of Chika's appeal has been her unfiltered voice on Twitter and other social media, where she hasn't hesitated to speak out about political issues such as Alabama's abortion ban, as well as social issues such as race, self-image and gender identity. Open about her vulnerabilities and down moments, but fiercely uncompromising about her art and her point of view, she's built a fan base that has been eager to see her cross over to commercial success.

The mood around the release of "High Rises" has been jubilant. The rapper tweeted last Saturday: "My first words this morning when I woke up were, 'I'm signed.'" In the days since then, she's revealed that "after dropping out of school [and] being broke while consistently going viral," she's enjoying the first fruits of her success: Having her own apartment.

According to Warner Records, Chika will release an EP later this summer. She also will appear at Essence Festival and the Afropunk Brooklyn festival.