CHIKA is a self-christened truth-teller, and she’s never shied away from that role — or the challenges that accompany it. The 26-year-old Alabama-born singer-songwriter and rapper caught the attention of a particular pocket of the internet when she began uploading her freestyles to social platforms like Instagram in the mid-2010s. With an immense display of creativity and, most of all, opinion, she was championed early on by hip-hop greats Snoop Dogg and Diddy and, later, President Barack Obama, who included her 2020 song “Crown” on his regularly anticipated Summer Playlist that year. But, after facing down a series of sociopolitical uprisings and a pandemic, CHIKA and the career she had spent years building were disrupted before she had a proper chance to take off.

Instead of allowing the fickle nature of life to carry her toward a destiny she hadn’t signed up for, CHIKA rerouted her energy into crafting music that speaks concisely and unabashedly about her place within this unexpected new reality. Her long-awaited debut album, Samson, nearly two years in the making, is a fully imagined body of work that reflects CHIKA’s penchant for commenting on the state of humanity, and how she moves through it all.

“For me, the creative process is so heavily married to how I feel,” CHIKA says. “I’m almost unable to separate what I’m writing about from what I’m feeling.” That feeling could shift at any given moment: from the electricity of intense excitement about the prospect of fulfillment to a downpour of disappointment when the mere possibility of creative failure arises. Regardless of the outcome, CHIKA is all about forward motion, and Samson is her opportunity to put her sheer resilience on vivid display.

Heavily inspired by the biblical character of the same name, Samson tells the story of unshakeable triumph that morphs into self-inflicted suffering before finally reaching much-deserved redemption. In the Bible, Samson is presented as one of the last righteous judges of Israel, a demigod whose superhuman strength lies in the length and health of his hair. On falling swiftly in love with a spy named Delilah, Samson reveals the secret of his God-given power, which leads to his enslavement. Calling on God to restore his powers, he uses them to kill his enslavers, their many followers — and ultimately himself.

Samson’s story resonates profoundly with CHIKA, who views it as a mirror of her approach to the album itself. “I’ve had my own mental health struggles in the past,” she says. “I’ve seen the fallout from my own decisions and mistakes, and I knew that if I was gonna put out this album, I wanted it to feel like, ‘Well, if I gotta go out, I’m taking this entire industry with me.’ I’m taking out every single person who has looked at my personal struggles as a joke or made a mockery out of them. If I’m gonna go out like this, we’re all going out like this.”

CHIKA’s current view of the music industry is admittedly different from the dreams she had at the beginning of her artistic journey. Born Jane Chika Oranika to Nigerian parents in Alabama, she and two of her older sisters formed a musical group called Angels of Love. With influences washing in from gospel artists like CeCe Winans and Ron Kenoly alongside secular artists like Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder, CHIKA credits her household as a place that introduced her to varied musical offerings. As she grew older, she discovered contemporary artists like T-Pain and Outkast, and explored her musicianship further in extracurricular activities like theater.

CHIKA’s initial EPs, 2020’s Industry Games, which earned her a Grammy nomination for Best New Artist, and 2021’s Once Upon a Time, featured her asserting her voice and position within the music landscape, combing through her thoughts and presenting the most salient among them as fan-favorite inspirational tunes. Songs on both projects have racked up millions of Spotify streams, including the worship-adjacent “Crown,” the sly yet confident “Songs About You,” and the motivational anthem “Hickory Dickory.”

Describing her current sound as “violently me,” CHIKA massages together her own fusion of hip-hop, pop, gospel, soul, and theatrical influences. “It’s very real,” she says. “And it can get gritty at times.”

CHIKA has had her own personal journey with mental health. On the elastic yet steadfast “Demigod,” she discusses her mental health at length: “I love when I’m manic, try not to panic / Walls in my head are all quilted and padded.” As intentional as she is about relaying her internal battles, CHIKA has no issue flipping the script to discuss the external factors that affect her. With tracks like Samson’s ambitious “Intro,” she speaks to the confidence it takes to overcome life’s difficulties. The second half of the album veers toward unguarded vulnerability, most palpable on “Delilah.” The song is ostensibly about Samson’s betrayer, but instead, CHIKA uses it to convey her gratitude for a close friend whom she credits with saving her life.

With features from living legend Stevie Wonder and Grammy-nominated rap luminary Freddie Gibbs, plus guest appearances by theater luminary Lin-Manuel Miranda, hip-hop icon Snoop Dogg, and Wale, CHIKA’s debut album brims with credits that speak to her present and future status in music.

CHIKA has always been a limitless dreamer and a passionate communicator, and Samson offers outright proof of that. “This is the tip of the iceberg,” she says. “This is the greatest thing I’ve done so far. But everything that I do after it, I plan to top it, and I plan to maintain the essence of vulnerability and honesty that I have put on this project, and every project before it.”