

# A teen idol breaks out on his own

Since parting ways with boy band B2K, Omarion is getting used to being treated like a heartthrob.

By Tracy E. Hopkins

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At a fashion show hosted by a popular radio station, the largely female audience erupts into shrieks of delight as Omari "Omarion" Grandberry takes the stage.

Backed by four male dancers, the former lead singer of boy band B2K fluidly pops, locks and gyrates through a coolly choreographed performance of songs from his chart-topping solo debut, "O." As he lifts his black tank to reveal a toned and tattooed torso, no one would suspect that Omarion, whose name means "African king forever," is the least bit daunted by hysterical throngs.

"It's not something you can get used to," the baby-faced singer explains over breakfast at an upscale Manhattan hotel. "You have some fans who are mellow. Then you have some fans who are like, 'Oh my God, Omarion!'"

Yet the designer-clad, cornrow-coiffed singer still craves the spotlight.

"Music is my passion. I feel like I was born for this," says the California native, who has been entertaining since age 5 and got his start in a cereal commercial. "When I decided to take on this responsibility, I understood that I wouldn't be able to do what other kids did. I know I have to sign autographs even when I don't feel like it."

Thus far, the 20-year-old's biggest challenge has been rebounding after B2K's abrupt breakup in 2004, just before the release of its dance-off film, "You Got Served."

Before the split, B2K was scheduled to perform in Philadelphia. Unbeknownst to Omarion, his bandmates Lil' Fizz (Dreux Frederic), J-Boog (Jarrell Houston) and Raz-B (Demario Thornton) weren't planning to show up. That would be his first solo stint.

"That was crazy right there. Philly is a hard crowd, just like New York. They were (yelling) 'B2K, B2K,'" he says, laughing. "But it's cool. Now I can't wait to hit the stage to show (how) your boy gets down."

With an album that debuted at No. 1, dance moves that rival Usher's, a two-picture deal with Paramount/MTV Films and a memoir in which he talks about his affiliation with a street gang ("I made a lot of bad decisions when I was a kid, but those decisions were for a reason

and helped me get to where I am now," he explains), Omarion has proved himself a multifaceted artist. But his success, he says, is bittersweet.

"Fame isn't for everyone," he says, taking a sip of herbal tea. "Because if I knew that I would separate from my best friends, I probably wouldn't have gotten involved (in show business). Friendship is everything in life. That's before money or anything."

Friction with his former roommates - they lived together for five years - started on the road and escalated when they accused manager Chris Stokes of mishandling their money. But Omarion, who has known Stokes since childhood, dismisses that claim.

With his dream of B2K becoming the new Temptations deferred, Omarion inquires on the autobiographical song "Growing Pains," "Loyalty, honesty, where did we go wrong?" "It was a wonderful experience writing about things that happened," says Omarion, who co-wrote five songs on "O." "It makes you feel like you're being real with your fans." Now that the rumor mill has stopped spinning, the "Fat Albert" co-star has even reconnected with Raz-B, who invited him to church. "I spoke with him and it was real cool," he says of seeing his estranged friend. "He said good luck with everything."

With "O," which features explicit lyrics and boasts production by the Neptunes, Rodney Jerkins, the Underdogs and Omarion's "You Got Served" co-star and confidant Marques Houston, the performer attempts to break away from B2K's bubble gum R&B.

"His talent progressed in the last three years," says Jerkins, who has worked with countless young performers including Brandy, Destiny's Child, and 'N Sync. "I think he's one to be reckoned with and believe he will be around for years to come."

Gail Mitchell of Billboard magazine also thinks the charismatic heartthrob will have continued success.

"I had a gut feeling the album would debut at No. 1," says Mitchell. "He had a strong, built-in audience because of B2K. I have an 11-year-old daughter and every time I tell her I'm going to interview him, she goes crazy."