



Seven years ago, when Kelly Clarkson triumphed in the first American Idol competition by blasting out the high-schlocky inspirational ballad "A Moment Like This," who could have guessed that she would become the early 21st century's exemplary Angry Chick? Everything changed in 2004, when Clarkson released a little song called "Since U Been Gone." That exploding stick of bubblegum pushed Clarkson to the forefront of the new girl-power pop, establishing her as the leader of a wave of pugnacious female stars — Avril and Pink and Katy Perry — who have stormed the Top of the Pops, bellowing their outrage over bright hooks and punchy guitars.

Even when Clarkson is happy, she sounds pissed. Exhibit A on the singer's fourth CD is the opener, "My Life Would Suck Without You." The keen-eared will detect a similarity between that chart-topper and "Since U Been Gone," from jittery guitar intro to shout-along chorus. Scrutinize the credits and you discover why: The new hit was co-written by Max Martin, the Swedish mad scientist behind some of the best radio pop of the past decade-plus ("... Baby One More Time," "I Want It That Way" and, yes, "Since U Been Gone").

Clarkson's recourse to Martin's Stockholm hit factory is not insignificant. Her 2007 album, *My December*, was a declaration of independence, released over the reported objections of her label. Its 13 gloomy songs, all co-composed by Clarkson, had scarcely a hook to wrap your ears around. So "My Life Would Suck Without You" is a kind of repentance, a chastened pop star's retreat from auteurdom. It's also, as it turns out, fantastic — the early favorite for single of the year.

It's hard to match that thunderclap opening, but Clarkson does, for a couple of songs, at least. "I Do Not Hook Up" is another spitfire mix of melody and crashing guitars — one of the most raucous odes to chastity in recent memory. Next comes "Cry," a big waltz-time ballad whose tune holds a hint of Nashville-pop twang. Clarkson grew up in Texas listening to country; "Cry" serves notice that she could give Carrie Underwood a run for her money.

Clarkson's voice remains one of the most powerful in pop, and on "Wanted" it flattens everything in its path, blasting through piano ballads, chirpy retrosoul and, on "Whyyawannabringmedown," a kind of AM-radio punk. "I'm not your love monkey, so be takin'

back all of the lies you sold," cries Clarkson over a pogo-ing beat.

That state of high dudgeon is her default mode. In song after song, she proclaims self-reliance in the face of ne'er-do-well men. It's a fine message, but Clarkson's sense of grievance, inflated to gargantuan size by her huge voice, can be wearying over 14 songs, particularly when the music sags. And sag it does. Clarkson has wedded her fate to Ryan Tedder, the heavily moussed OneRepublic songwriter: He contributes to four dreary songs, awash in strings and insipid sentiments like "Why are my convictions blinded by your spotlight?"

Clarkson snarls gamely through such moments, but as My December proved, virtuoso vocals carry you only so far. Like everyone else, she rises and falls on the strength of her tunes. She has made brilliant singles, and may yet record a great album. It's no mystery how to start. Three words: more Max Martin.