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## Kelly Clarkson's Vocals Keep Getting 'Stronger'

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Like a lot of successful *American Idol* contestants, [Kelly Clarkson](#) made her reputation as a belter — as someone who could project to the rafters and rouse a crowd — which doesn't necessarily translate into good pop singing. Ever since Bing Crosby started using the microphone as an instrument for achieving intimacy and nuance, the idea of delivering popular song as operatic aria is a flawed strategy. But everybody loves an anthem, right?

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" is the underlying sentiment of virtually all Kelly Clarkson

music. She's built her career around an explosive paradox: Her best hits are little time bombs of frayed emotions that throw off sparks, arriving stuffed in big cannonballs of sound. You can hear it in "You Can't Win," a burst of spiteful self-pity.

Too often on her new fifth album, *Stronger*, Clarkson has settled for second-rate material. She sometimes seems to be singing songs that [Justin Timberlake](#) rejected. How else to explain the choice of a song such as "Einstein," with its tortured, mathematically illiterate organizing metaphor? Some of the song's verses are fun just because they're so ostentatiously foolish.

"Dumb plus dumb equals you," Clarkson bellows. On second thought, I kind of love that performance, in its goofy way. Far better is the kind of crisp vocal work Clarkson brings to a vocal hook worthy of her dramatized agony. It's gloriously on display in "You Love Me," as Clarkson leaps registers from verse to chorus without ever making it seem like a mere stunt. Instead, it serves the arc of the emotions the singer wants to explore.

"I'm not good enough," Clarkson sings in that song. In numerous other tracks, she goes back to the same idea — she feels condescended to, put down, humiliated by a lover or, by extension, an audience. Sometimes she lashes out, as she does in "Mr. Know It All."

That song features a fine Clarkson vocal, all the better for the stripped-down arrangement over which the singer allows you to hear a strain in her voice — it's what makes the refrain, "You don't know a thing about me" take on a kind of artistic truth. The song becomes a retort to the lover she's addressing, sure, but also to her critics, and to those fans who want to own her pain.

The album could use more of this sort of gutsiness. Ultimately, *Stronger* is a weaker album than some of Clarkson's previous efforts, but its high points provide a reminder of why she can be so effective. She takes that huge voice and lets it loose, while maintaining a fierce control that creates thrilling tension.

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