

THE CREATIVE 100

Keke Palmer Spent 20 Years Cultivating Creative Control. Now She'd Rather Share It

The actor talks about spotlighting the next generation of diverse talent on her digital platform



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Wearing an ankle-length dress and a glossy updo while posing outside her Los Angeles home, Keke Palmer decides that intermissions are for entertainment. In the quiet moments between takes of her Adweek photo shoot, Palmer belts out Destiny's Child lyrics for a skeleton crew of photographers, stylists and assistants. With these impromptu concerts, it's as if the actor, singer (she released her latest album, *Big Boss*, in May) and now emerging media mogul is recalling the performances that helped put her on the map—and the public persona, untethered to a single role, that has kept her career thriving for two decades.

Following her acting debut as Queen Latifah's niece in 2004's *Barbershop 2: Back in Business*, Palmer had her breakout role as a spelling bee phenom in the 2006 drama *Akeelah and the Bee*, and spent three seasons as the title character in Nickelodeon's *True Jackson, VP*. More recently, she starred in critically acclaimed hit films like *Hustlers* and *Nope*.

But as her acting career unfolded, Palmer recognized the limitations of staying in front of the camera in a space that can lack talent accessibility and creative autonomy. Embracing the power of crafting her own narrative, she began exploring the unscripted side of entertainment while taking hold of ideation and production.





The self-proclaimed “millennial diva” now uses online spaces to confidently capitalize on fan access to both rehearsed creative and off-the-cuff commentary, which often goes viral in a typically engineered digital environment. Through KeyTV, her free digital platform that she launched last November as an industry entry point for diverse creators, Palmer wants to present new talent with access to the creative control that she has long worked to establish for herself.

“I had to exercise patience and believe that one day I would have the independence, both financially and creatively, to say and do the things I wanted with full force,” she said.

Palmer sat down with Adweek to talk through the creative process, artistic ownership and purpose-driven ambition that has carried her from child stardom into her unlikely personal brand.

(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

Adweek: You rose to fame as an actor, but you’ve said in past interviews that building your public persona outside of TV and movies is what you enjoy most. Is that still the case?

Keke Palmer: I think so, and I’ve had even more fun with it since having my son [in February]. The whole process of pregnancy, motherhood and then meeting and getting to know him, it just brings so



much beauty and joy into my life. It has inspired

ease and a quality to things being not that big of a deal because he's here.

You talk about motherhood changing your perspective on creativity. What does your creative process typically look like?

I do so many different things. It could be having a conversation with someone or sitting down and having a writing session. It could be improvising on set or talking to one of my writing partners, and creating a character on the spot based on a video we just saw. In every moment that I feel it, I'm not afraid to create it. Creativity does not have to be bound to a specific scenario. When I don't feel it, I definitely don't force it.

Between acting, making music and now running KeyTV, you are involved in many different projects. How do you balance your time? How do you decide what to say "no" to?

As years have gone on, saying "no" to things I don't need to be doing or calls I don't have to be on has gotten a lot easier. I'm putting myself first so I have the energy to do all the other things that I need to do. Having boundaries and saying, "Hey, this may not be able to happen right now," or, "Hey, maybe this isn't that important to me" is just a part of my reality.



STARRY GETS AN ASSIST FROM KEKE PALMER AND TYRESE MAXEY IN NBA ALL-STAR WEEKEND DEBUT

Throughout your 20 years working in the industry, you say that launching KeyTV is what you're most proud of. What does that reflect about your personal and professional development?

I want to make myself accessible to the next generation coming up, so they can see that what I've done is possible and they can do even greater things. Because I started my career so young, I said, 'How can I share that with others who don't have the access that I had, or the parents that I have or aren't even certain what their dream is?' KeyTV is another version of opening myself up and giving [new talent] access to my world.



You talk about wanting to uplift new talent

Emmy

We do the casting process as normal, but you don't necessarily need an agent or to go through some of those typical doors of a traditional vetting process. I'll see somebody online and say, "Hey, I think we need to talk to this person," and people email us or reach out on Instagram. It's all very open, but there is also structure to it because I want people to understand the protocol of working in this business.

It's just somebody with talent and skill. Somebody who can know their lines but isn't afraid to make a performance that is filled with a choice. As an actor, I'm always looking for other actors who aren't afraid to make a choice, even if it's a quirky one.

We also welcome actors that we haven't seen in a while. Especially with me being an entertainer since I was a kid, I know maintaining your momentum from being a child entertainer to being an adult is really difficult. I also want to bring back some of those faces I grew up with.

“Being creative is expensive, and that’s not something that people talk about enough.”

Keke Palmer

After getting your start as an actor so early in life, how did you predict your career would unfold? Did you ever look for more of a say in your roles?

When I first started out, I had no idea what I would amount to. I definitely didn't imagine having a brand at any point. There were times as an actress when I wanted to say more and do more, but I didn't because I was a kid and I hadn't found my voice yet. I didn't know exactly what I wanted or have the financial capacity to do some of my own things. I do think that's a big part of creativity. Being creative is expensive, and that's not something that people talk about enough.

I had to exercise patience and believe that one day I would have the independence, both financially and creatively, to say and do the things I wanted with full force.

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5



You seem to engage in purpose-driven work

campaigns. How do you pick the brands you want to work with?

I think about the longevity I can have with the brand, and also how [the relationship] will be perceived by my audience. If there is no opportunity to give back and benefit my community, or to just have fun and have balance, then I don't want to do it. Most brands come to me with their content already "Keke-fied." They are already speaking in my voice.

I've always had a lot of fun with McDonald's, simply because I've worked with the brand since I was 16 years old. The beginning of the Keke Palmer brand, which was birthed from Akeelah and the Bee, is my community-based and mentorship kind of space. I've gone from doing singing competitions with them in the early 2000s to working with their change leaders. In 2023, we're actually giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to young people to start and create their own businesses. It feels really awesome to work with such a popular brand in such an impactful way.

Keke Palmer on Her Creative Process



Beyond casting talent in your KeyTV shows, how else are you supporting a new generation of creatives?

There are so many great opportunities when it comes to entertainment and democratizing the industry that lends itself to a multitude of products, from fashion to beauty to just community-building. I'm definitely excited to take the opportunities that have been solely for me, Keke Palmer, and anybody that's directly connected to the Keke Palmer brand, and expand that to KeyTV, which is about so much more.

The first half of our slate was introducing our

who created our shows. I think they'll be really excited to see people of color in positions behind the scenes. A lot of people immediately think about being a celebrity or being on-camera. But there are a lot of other impactful ways to establish a career for yourself that you either may not know about or may not have had access to.

What was the inspiration behind KeyTV's business model, and how does that relate to the platform's purpose?

It is important to me that KeyTV is free. Maybe somewhere down the line, we can have a pay-per-view or subscription service for longer content, but at this point, I want it to be something that everyone can access. Growing up, being able to access PBS was huge. We didn't have cable for a long time, but we were able to watch Dragon Tales and Barney and Sesame Street. If they had a TV, every child was able to have these iconic shows that we all know and love.

“A lot of creatives don't have a full view of what it means to have business literacy.”

Keke Palmer

What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced when planning and executing KeyTV?

I've had people say, "I don't even know how to do a deal," but it's

not really ethical for me to walk them through that. That's difficult when I'm the one giving the opportunity, but I can point you in the direction of what you should do. I'm really having those raw conversations that maybe most executives wouldn't have because I do want to give new people an opportunity.

People all the time online are like, "Why don't we see anybody new?" It's not because new people don't deserve the opportunity, but it's easier to work with somebody at a fast-food restaurant that already knows how to flip burgers. You need to have a lot of patience, but that's what makes us different. Not just for the viewer looking for a new face, but for the person who wants to know they can have a chance.



In your documentary **Big Boss**, which is

like, **“Silly me to ever think they would fuck with me just off the strength of my talent.”**

How did it feel to offer people that tone?

It was really empowering to have the space to showcase something like that and give it to my audience for free. I think people would be more surprised thinking I'd have a different experience than other young women or people in the industry. It was an artistic pursuit and therapeutic for me to get that off my chest and hopefully allow that testimony to ring true for others.

Are there any common misconceptions about breaking into the industry that you want to teach your network at KeyTV?

I'm sure there are a lot of people who want to film their own movie, but it's quite expensive. We sell our IP and masters as creatives because we can't afford to do it ourselves. It takes a lot of money to complete, and a lot of money to promote. And a lot of creatives don't have a full view of what it means to have business literacy.

When you are doing a collaboration, there is going to be a give and take. If I'm doing business with Paramount, I can't expect to own 90% if they're giving 50% of the budget. **Big Boss** was on KeyTV, but for an amount of time it was licensed out because that's what was comfortable for me. And then I was able to give it to my audience. Business literacy could be talked about a little more so creatives can negotiate smarter.

You also have to look and say, 'How much am I benefiting from this?' A lot of people have been quiet about what they've given up because they felt the popularity was worth what they sold. Having the transparency to say, "If this is not comfortable for you, then we shouldn't do business" is necessary as a creative.

How have you used social media to build the Keke Palmer brand? Have you ever had reservations about the emotional impact of platforms?

I'm very conscientious of how the algorithm works. I definitely overuse the "not interested" button. I don't use it in a way that would give me stress like



say, ‘If this is not comfortable for you, then we shouldn’t do business’ is necessary as a creative.”

Keke Palmer

I did plenty of times

learn about my audience and be able to engage.

What’s most important to me is the freedom that I have through these individual platforms. It’s really a way to talk to my audience and build different content around what they love.

What’s next for you? Do you want to maintain full creative responsibility and freedom on your projects?

I’d like to continue to be creative, for sure. I don’t know if I’ll always be at the forefront of it, but being the individual talent is really enjoyable for me. But if there ever comes a time when it’s not, then hey, that’s fine, too. But I’m always going to be creative and I’ll never stop working in the industry because it’s my industry, whether I’m the star of the project or not.

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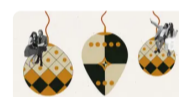
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How Palmer Pushed Visa Out of Its Creative ‘Comfort Zone’

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Palmer has amassed an impressive array of brand partnerships—including PepsiCo’s Starry soda, Olay, McCormick, Uber Eats and Ugg—but she is particularly proud of her creative collaboration

with Visa. When the brand tapped her to voice a

speak in her language. The actor narrated three spots for Visa's "Anyone Can Change The Game" campaign, each focusing on how transaction solutions can foster unlikely business growth.

Chronicling a modest food truck outperforming an upscale restaurant, a nail tech setting up shop at her school library and a lackluster little league football team celebrating their new equipment, Visa identified the Palmer persona that delivers inspiration with endearing boldness.

"I like when brands either show they know my voice or are welcoming me to help them get it right," said Palmer. "I remember thinking, 'They know what side they want. They want the one with flavor.'"

While Visa came to Palmer with a solid hold on her brand already, it also encouraged her to make additional creative changes. In one spot, spotlighting the young entrepreneur who is "doing nails at school to pay for school," Palmer responds to the student being shushed by a librarian with, "Hold on, Ms. Lady," instead of a safer and more forgettable "excuse me" from the original script.

This was the first time the brand had put that degree of creative trust in one of its celebrity collaborators. "We gave her the freedom to say, 'If you want to use my voice, then let it be my voice,'" said Visa head of North America marketing Mary Ann Reilly of working with Palmer. "She was our first foray into releasing our control and pushing out of our comfort zone."



UBER EATS' HORROR FLICK STARS KEKE PALMER AND \$1 MILLION IN HIDDEN PROMO CODES

Unlocking KeyTV



When she launched KeyTV last November, Palmer wanted to outline the breadth of industry opportunity for young creators while offering a more accessible entry point. As an industry veteran who encompasses the value of creative freedom, she also hopes to facilitate community for BIPOC talent by offering a collaborative space that doesn't confine them to a single task.

The initial slate featured both scripted shows like *Heaux and Tell*, a miniseries starring three best friends that offers honest conversations around sex and sexuality, and unfiltered content like *Make It Make Sense*, which follows creators as they dissect the nuances of internet culture.

KeyTV has also offered Palmer some catharsis: She produced and released the documentary *Big Boss* on the platform, which outlines the discrimination in a male-dominated music industry that ultimately led to the launch of her own label.



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*This story is part of Adweek's [*Creativity x Culture*](#) digital features package, which spotlights the people, marketing strategies and creativity driving lasting cultural and societal change.*

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