

# NEW



# B EAT

*Young entrepreneur,  
musician and  
billionaire heiress  
Ananya Birla tells  
Neville Bhandara  
how she navigates  
the weight of a lofty  
family name in  
her quest to do  
what she loves*

Photographs **TARAS TARAPORVALA** Styling **RAHUL VIJAY**  
Art direction **RESHMA RAJIWDEKAR**

Embellished denim dress,  
**Rose Room Couture**

*Opposite page:* Cotton T-shirt,  
leather jacket; both **Gucci**.  
Neoprene sharara pants,  
**Rose Room Couture**





Canvas dress, silk  
cover-up; both **Deme**  
By **Gabriella**

**HAIR AND MAKE-UP:**  
AVNI RAMBHIA;  
ASSISTED BY: ANERI  
KORADIA (PRODUCTION),  
SEJAL PENDHARKAR  
AND JAHNVI  
BANSAL (STYLING)

Taras Tarapovvala

**T**here's something so satisfying about hating someone successful. Even easier if the person is eye-poppingly rich.

Twenty-two-year-old Ananya Birla is the eldest daughter of industrialist Kumar Mangalam Birla, chairman of the Aditya Birla Group. A cursory glance through her Instagram, where she posts pictures of herself jetting across the world on private planes and hanging out with EDM demigod Afrojack in Las Vegas, is enough to draw out the ugly green-eyed monster. You know, that little goblin that rears its head whenever we come across someone whose life is better than ours?

When Birla released her first single, 'Livin' the life' in 2016, the reception wasn't quite what she'd hoped for. Facebook was awash with people sharing the link to the video, with jeering captions ranging from 'Money can buy anything these days' to 'Someone please tell her to stop'. The video, shot on Santa Catalina Island off the west coast of USA, shows her hopping and bopping to the song's electronic beat as she sings about people playing with her heart. Sure, the beat is infectious, and the location is beautiful, but what most people saw was a rich kid getting to do what most seasoned musicians could never even dream of: cutting a track with top producers like Afrojack and Jim Beanz (who has worked with Nelly Furtado and Whitney Houston).

"Not everyone is going to like you," says Birla, dressed in a black T-shirt and blue jeans, and sitting across the table from me in a glass cube of a meeting room. She's flanked by her managers, and we're in the office of décor e-tailer CuroCarte, which Birla set up last year. "People do have the right to say that they don't like my music, but when they start attacking my family, it gets personal," she says.

Birla studied economics and management at the University of Oxford, and had a tough time adjusting, thanks to an intense course load and the infamously grey English weather. She became reclusive and wouldn't leave her lodgings for months at a time, except for classes. She turned inward, and to her music for company—she had learnt the santoor as a child and taught herself to play the guitar. "I'd pick up my guitar and play a few tunes; and before I knew it, hours would have passed."

She counts Ed Sheeran, Justin Bieber and Imagine Dragons among her inspirations, as well as more old-school influencers such as Metallica and Nirvana. She's also a fan of Bollywood, especially the slower tracks. While 'Livin' the life' is more EDM, Birla hints that her next single will be different; it may even be completely acoustic. "I feel like I'm a little more subdued now," she says.

*"People do have the right to say that they don't like my music, but when they start attacking my family, it gets personal"*

Family fortune notwithstanding, Birla is a workaholic and a serial entrepreneur. At 17, she started Svatantra, a micro-finance company that seeks to empower rural women through entrepreneurship. It presently has a valuation of ₹ 250 crore. The money Birla has made from this, along with whatever she makes from CuroCarte, is what she pumps into her music. "I've been working very hard since before I was even an adult. I've created this opportunity for myself; but it's hard to explain that to people, all they see is my surname," she says.

She's currently associated with a global project for gender equality in partnership with ELLE and The World Bank, which aims to use art and media to promote positive change. "I'm thrilled to be a

part of it," she says, "but, if we're talking about 'gender equality', I think it's crucial to first address how toxic our idea of masculinity is. Just because we're feminists doesn't mean we only talk about women; we need to tell other stories too—about boys who cry, or those who don't play sports, or aren't macho."

To make sure her work hours have even fewer interruptions, Birla has a mattress in her office, where she takes quick catnaps, as she believes they boost her productivity. When she's not running two businesses while simultaneously juggling her music career, she spends time with her family. "We're very close. I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing without them. Their support means everything to me," she says.

She also spends a lot of her free time at Lotus, an old-age home in Mumbai, where she's made two friends: Kumudri,

and a lady she simply refers to as "masi". When they're not bonding over their days, she plays the guitar for them. Sometimes, they even keep her youthful ambition in check and dispense some age-old wisdom—the kind one only gets from talking to someone who has lived far too long to worry about political correctness.

Birla is taking her lessons wherever they'll come from—her many, many detractors, for example—and using them to fortify and fuel her determination. She's got three new singles coming out this year, an album slated to release early next year, and then, she hopes to be able to tour. "But no Bollywood," she's quick to add. "I don't relate to it the way I relate to music." ●