

I'm not unwell. I am not a used me to boost ratings...

Shirlena Johnson sits on the sofa with her hands clasped in her lap and her three-year-old daughter squealing delightedly by her side. Her mauve nail polish is chipped, her long hair slightly dishevelled. When she speaks, her right cheek quivers slightly. She seems nervous yet friendly, a woman who compensates for her insecurity with awkward charm and an eagerness to please.

It is not necessarily the impression you would

by **Antonia Hoyle**

expect to get when meeting Shirlena – she has, after all, spent the past week being branded a borderline psychotic whose mental health has become a national talking point.

Shirlena's rise to infamy began last Saturday night, when her prerecorded appearance on the new series of ITV's *The X Factor* drew gasps of

shock and glee. Her song choice was *Mercy* by the pop star Duffy, and to say her performance was unorthodox would be something of an understatement: dressed in leopard-print leggings, part of her act involved her clawing at the floor and growling like an animal.

Needless to say, the judges – who might have been fearful that the show's seventh series would have lost its ability to shock – loved it. Simon Cowell described Shirlena as 'fantastically nuts' and she was voted through to the next round of the competition.

Unknown to the watching public, she had already been selected for the penultimate stage of the contest, when she would be taken to a judge's house to audition for the live shows which begin this autumn.

As viewing figures soared to 12.6 million, Shirlena allowed herself to dream of an escape from her dreary life as a single mother on an East London estate.

Then, last Tuesday she was summoned from her two-bedroom council flat to the programme's Central London offices, where two of the show's producers told her that she was being pulled out of the show.

They said they had received medical information that meant she could no longer proceed. As if to prove it, they got Cowell himself on the phone, who, as executive producer, confirmed he would have to let her go.

Suddenly, her rendition of *Mercy* seemed less the creative quirkiness of a showbusiness hopeful and more the unhinged ramblings of a lunatic. Overnight, Shirlena became a tabloid caricature, viewed with sympathy and scorn in equal measure.

There were those who believed she somehow duped the show's producers

'Why put me on TV and build my hopes up?'

and concealed a dangerous and turbulent mental history from them. They say *The X Factor* acted responsibly by dismissing a young woman ill-equipped to deal with the pressures of stardom.

But others thought the show's knee-jerk reaction seemed suspiciously like yet another ratings-boosting publicity stunt. Cowell and his team were more than happy to screen her performance last Saturday, after all, and had no cause for complaint in the six months they had already spent getting her there.

If they were really that concerned as to her wellbeing, some asked, could they not have voiced their opinions earlier, before raising Shirlena's hopes so high?

Unsurprisingly, Shirlena herself falls into the latter camp. 'I feel angry, upset, shocked and very confused. I thought I had a chance of winning the competition, and now I'm left with nothing,' she says. 'Why build my hopes up, and let my performance be shown on television? They had plenty of opportunity to check my medical history beforehand.'

'I can't help feeling they just wanted me on television first because I was good for ratings. I am not mentally ill and I am more than capable of dealing with the pressure. Somebody has said something to them but they won't tell me what this medical information is or where they have got it from.'

Shirlena, 30, admits that she has suffered from stress over the past year and is undoubtedly fragile. But she by no means comes across as incom-

After rave reviews for her eccentric audition on last week's reality show, Shirlena Johnson was abruptly fired. Here, in this savage critique, she reveals how she was the victim of a cruel publicity stunt – and describes what really happens when the cameras stop rolling

petent or out of control. She is one of five siblings. Her parents – Jamaican immigrants – separated when she was two and she was brought up in Derby by her mother, Carmen, 53, a chef.

A keen musician from an early age, Shirlena learned to play the organ after hearing it at Sunday church services. After A-levels, she moved to Milton Keynes, where her father Charles, an engineer, was then living, and studied speech and drama at London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

Shirlena spent her 20s trying to break into the entertainment industry, while living in council accommodation in London and depending on her father for financial support. 'He loved my voice and always thought I should fulfil my dreams,' she says. 'I used to sing Gershwin's *Summertime* to him and we visited art galleries together. We were incredibly close.'

Certainly, she needed his support when she became pregnant in 2006. She admits that neither she nor her boyfriend of two years had planned the pregnancy, but says she was delighted when Mariah was born in June 2007. Last year she and her boyfriend, whom she is unwilling to name, split up – and becoming a single mother must have made subsequent

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bad mother. X Factor just and I'm left with nothing

TRYING FOR A BETTER FUTURE: Shirlena happily playing with daughter Mariah last week and, inset right, performing on The X Factor. 'I thought I could win it,' she says



IAN MCGORM

events even more crippling. In April 2009, her father had a heart attack.

By the time she arrived at the hospital, he was on a ventilator, unresponsive. Shirlena sat by his bedside for two days until he died, aged just 54. 'I was in shock afterwards,' she says. 'I couldn't believe he wasn't here. Everything suddenly felt very different.'

A month later, her doctor diagnosed her with stress. 'I didn't feel depressed, but I had become more reclusive and less enthusiastic about life,' she says.

She admits too that she suffered panic attacks and was visited by social services who worried she was incapable of looking after Mariah.

'They came round four times, each time for under an hour, and I hated every moment,' she says. 'I resented the fact they thought I couldn't cope and was terrified they would take my daughter away.'

Shirlena – who maintained full custody of her daughter – was prescribed a low-level 5mg daily dose of antidepressant and given weekly sessions with a psychiatrist. She slowly regained her strength and the psychiatrist sessions stopped after a couple of months, leaving Shirlena still more determined to

sing. 'I wanted my dad to be proud of me and to achieve his ambitions for me,' she says.

She auditioned for The X Factor in February at London's ExCel centre.

'I took Mariah and queued from 8.30am for around seven hours in the rain,' she says. 'Then we were taken inside. We had to provide our name, age and reason for entering.'

She reveals that the selection process is carefully masterminded and somewhat more arduous than it appears on screen, designed to filter through contestants who will make

'Some contestants went on the rampage in a bar'

the most entertaining television and ensure that judges Cowell, Louis Walsh and Cheryl Cole don't have to endure any more auditions than necessary. It was around 7pm that evening before she was able to sing, and then only to a couple of executives. She sang Summertime in memory of her father and the executives approved it. 'I made it quirky because I believe artists should be

different,' she says. 'My musical heroines are Eartha Kitt, Grace Jones and Lady Gaga. I was through to the next round. I was thrilled.'

But she still had to be given the green light from another group of executives before she was put forward to the auditions that are screened on television. These took place two months later and, she says, involved another 12-hour queue at the ExCel centre.

By the time she had left Mariah in the arms of host Dermot O'Leary and was thrust in front of the celebrity judges, she was awash with nerves and excitement. 'I hadn't rehearsed my routine because I'm better when I'm spontaneous,' she says. 'I think they liked me because I was different.'

Of course, her traumatic past and desire to forge a better future for herself and her daughter provided ample fodder for the show's producers, for whom an eventful 'back story' is every bit as important as an ability to sing. Although Cole was nonplussed by Shirlena's unusual routine, Walsh and Cowell voted her through to the Boot Camp stage, when 100 selected acts are whittled down to 32. It lasted a week, and took place at Wembley Stadium in

July. Contestants were put up in a Premier Inn and given £22.50 for daily expenses. Shirlena – whose aunt looked after Mariah – shared a room with another contestant.

Entrants were divided into four categories – boys, girls, groups and those aged over 28 – and told to perform two songs in front of the judges. 'The atmosphere was tense,' she says. 'There was a lot of jealousy. My songs were Poker Face and Bad Romance by Lady Gaga.'

'I'd designed a white robe with a hood with holes that I could pull my hair out in bunches from. Simon said he loved the hat, but some of the other contestants said it looked stupid and told me to take it off.'

It seems Shirlena became something of a loner. 'Some of the younger contestants went on a rampage in the hotel bar, but I took the competition seriously and didn't get involved,' she says.

'When I was selected as one of the final eight acts in my category, I was so happy. I heard that Louis Walsh was to be our mentor and that we would be flown to his house in Ireland for the judge's round, where he would pick three of us for the live shows.'

All contestants had been made to fill in a more detailed questionnaire in this round, in which they were asked if they had any history of psychiatric problems or were on medication. Shirlena admitted that she had been taking aripiprazole pills for stress and seen a psychiatrist, and gave them her doctors' details.

'I didn't say any more than that because I thought they would ask me if they had questions,' she says. 'I certainly wasn't trying to hide anything.' A week later, at a routine interview with one of the show's doctors, there were no questions about stress or medical problems.

She spent the next few weeks polishing her performances for the next round and eagerly awaiting the screening of her first audition last Saturday. When the time finally came, she prepared roast chicken and chips for herself and Mariah, who was allowed to stay up especially for the occasion. 'I didn't think my routine was over the top,' she says. 'Just because I'm eccentric on stage doesn't mean I'm like that off it.'

But her new-found acclaim was short-lived. On Tuesday, a newspaper story claimed that Shirlena was a 'ticking time bomb' whose continued presence on the show would risk both her own and her daughter's wellbeing. She was com-

pared to Britain's Got Talent singer Susan Boyle, who suffered a breakdown after appearing on the show.

Shirlena was called into the X Factor offices and told that medical advice they had received made her position in the show untenable. 'They said they couldn't tell me who had told them. I was trying not to cry. They got Simon on the phone. He sounded sad and said he would try to let me stay.'

The X Factor makers said that they had received Shirlena's medical file only last Monday, meaning they had been unable to prevent her first performance being screened.

But she doubts this. 'I suspect it had been hidden under a pile of paperwork, or they hadn't bothered to check it in the first place,' she says. 'I haven't yet asked my GP if he was the person who had contacted the show. I find it hard to believe. Somebody, for some reason, has deliberately ruined my chance but I don't know who or why.' She adds: 'Millions of people get help for stress as I have done. I wouldn't say that means I am mentally ill.'

Shirlena was due to fly out to Louis Walsh's home last Thursday. Instead, she is left to contemplate a future not only without The X Factor, but

'Someone deliberately ruined my chance'

one in which she is known throughout Britain as mentally unstable and a bad mother. 'That is the most worrying thing,' she says. 'I am going to struggle to get a job now and people are wondering whether I am a good parent. That is difficult to accept and very hurtful.'

Last week she declined a session with the X Factor counsellor. All she really wants is to be let back on to the show, she says.

Of course, it is possible that Shirlena has a string of psychotic incidents on her medical record that both she and The X Factor are choosing not to reveal.

But it seems more likely that Cowell – already accused of turning his reality television programmes into freak shows, not to mention last week's furore over the use of autotuning – panicked and made a rash decision.

Shirlena, meanwhile, is left defiant but vulnerable, the victim of a television programme that uses its contestants to boost its ratings, then casually tosses them aside.

A spokeswoman for Talkback Thames, the company that makes The X Factor, said: 'We requested Shirlena's GP report some time ago and it was duly chased. As soon as we received the report we acted on it in a responsible way. We cannot comment on an individual's health as it is private and confidential.'

See pictures from last night's show at...
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