

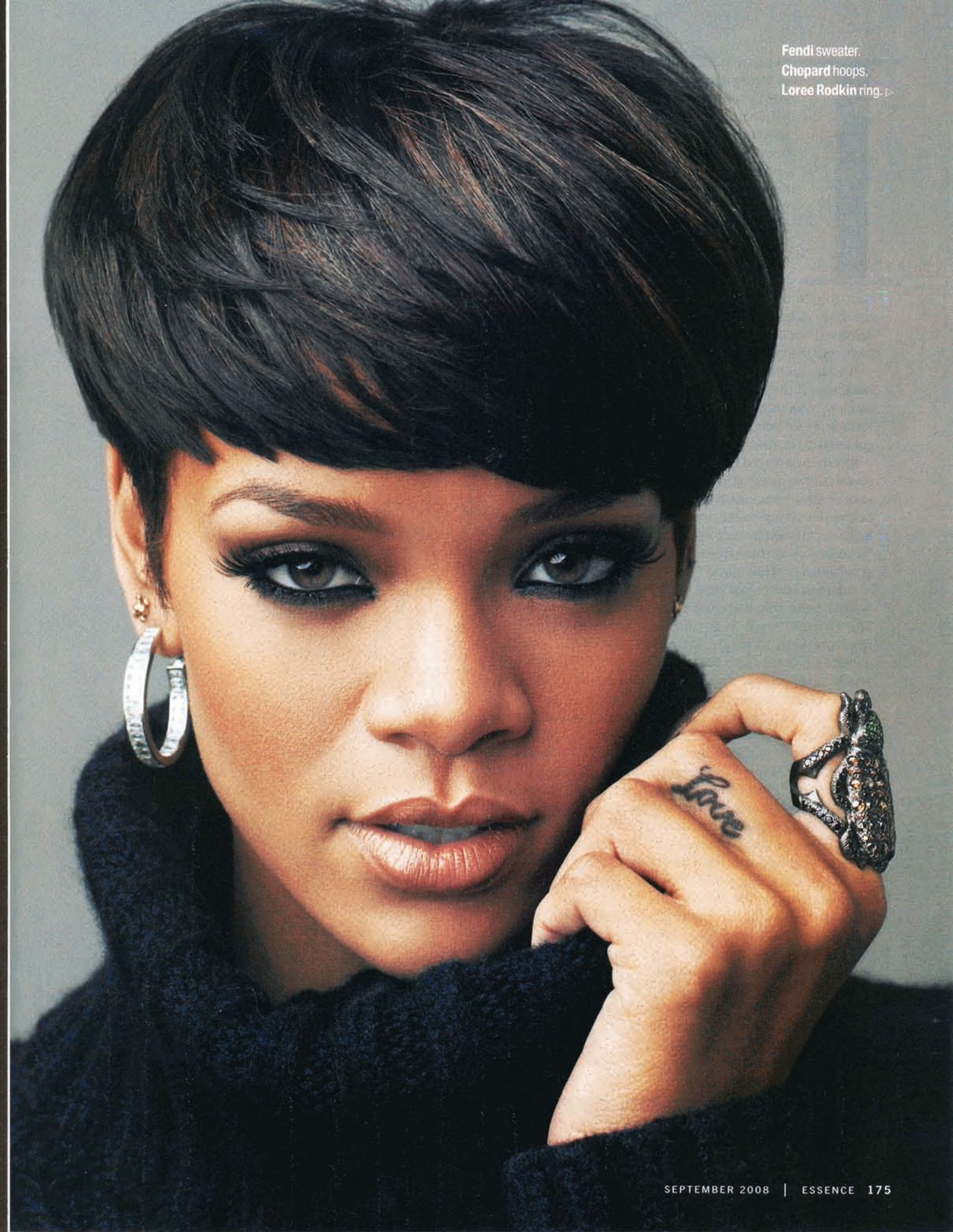
# RIHANNA RIHANNA RIHANNA RIHANNA RIHANNA

WITH HER STANDOUT DO, IMPECCABLE FASHION SENSE, UNDENIABLE HITS AND ROCK-STAR EDGE, RIHANNA'S BLAZING HER OWN TRAIL. WATCH HER SMOKE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT MAXWELL

STYLING BY AGNES CAMMOCK

Fendi sweater.  
Chopard hoops.  
Loree Rodkin ring.



It's just after 8:30 p.m. on a drizzly Wednesday in Minneapolis, a midwestern stop on Kanye West's sold-out Glow in the Dark tour. Then Rihanna emerges—a vision in all black, sporting opera-length gloves and a sleeveless hooded coatdress over a haltered catsuit—and begins to belt out “Breakin’ Dishes” from her multiplatinum album *Good Girl Gone Bad*. Sure, she looks great, but this is more than a fashion show. A lot more.

In an industry where image is everything, female artists tend to sport a standard uniform—long, light hair, tight abs and exposed skin. Rihanna, now 20, was no different when she released her 2005 debut, *Music of the Sun*. Eight months later, she delivered her sophomore set, *A Girl Like Me*. The sound was fresh, but the look? Same old, safe old. And she knew it.

“I’ve always hated being like everybody else,” Rihanna says backstage at the Target Center, carefully touching up her eye shadow. “As a teenager, I started to find myself and play with fashion. I like being edgy and a little to the left, but when I got into this business, everything was about a formula.”

So Rihanna played the game—and then? “I was over it!” she says with characteristic candor. That’s when she started to take control—one coif at a time. “We cut her hair the night before the album-packaging photo shoot for *Good Girl Gone Bad*,” recalls Rihanna’s do-right stylist, Ursula Stephen. “Somebody was there from the label, on my back, like, ‘How short will it be? How black?’”

Rihanna didn’t just stop with her look—she kicked her fashion game into high gear and pumped up the music too. She enlisted Jay-Z to rhyme the opening verse of her Grammy-winning single “Umbrella,” and by the time she added R&B singer Chris Brown to the remix, our brains were stuck on repeat—*eh, eh, eh, eh-eh*. Then came the whispers about her chemistry with Brown outside of the studio.

Rihanna laughs when she sees their pictures plastered on blogs and in tabloids. “It’s funny when people think they know what our relationship is,” she says matter-of-factly. “A lot of my time is spent with people who are older than me, so at some point I just feel like hanging out with someone my own age. I really enjoy his company.”

The feeling seems mutual during her *ESSENCE* photo shoot. Brown is on set, nodding approval. Seeing a tape recorder, he scoots in the opposite direction on his skateboard. But his attention is clearly focused on Rihanna, who blushes when he playfully quips, “Work it, girl.”

So maybe she’s taking a page from another megastar singer’s playbook, refusing to acknowledge her relationship, letting her fashion-forward image take center stage. But does Rihanna ever worry that her red-carpet-ready appearance might overshadow her music? “No worries at all,” she says in her Bajan lilt. “I don’t think I would have had such a strong impact with the music now if I hadn’t changed my image. But even if I had the dopest haircut and the flyest clothes, if the music I put out was wack, people would know.”

—REGINA R. ROBERTSON □

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See exclusive behind-the-scenes video of Rihanna’s fashion shoot and interview.



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