
MUSIC REVIEW

Fantasia, Mario ignite the stage

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BY RASHOD D. OLLISON
[SUN POP MUSIC CRITIC]

Mario and Fantasia, two standout talents in the overly calculated realm of modern R&B, have placed big hits on the pop and urban charts and sold millions of albums. But neither has fulfilled the promise of his or her talent.

There's still hope, though. Mario and Fantasia, the marquee names at Friday night's African American Heritage Festival at Camden Yards, are younger than 25. So with time (and, with any luck, better material), both should soar artistically.

But for now, the two are churning out mostly trite urban-pop tunes and albums brimming with rudimentary, trend-conscious production. Sometimes, they manage to invigorate and add emotional heft to the fluff — the hallmark of gifted singers.

Onstage, however, neither Mario nor Fantasia puts much effort into song interpretation. It's all about churchy theatrics and over-the-top histrionics (Fantasia) and effortless swagger and cool sex appeal (Mario).

But Baltimore native Mario Barrett, whose profile among mainstream [Please see *HERITAGE*, 2C]

Fantasia, Mario come on strong

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audiences received a boost after a six-week stint on the hit show *Dancing with the Stars*, was focused on performance Friday.

He used most of his 45 stage minutes to promote the Mario Do-Right Foundation, a charity that he launched in March to help young people affected by drug abuse. As the enthusiastic crowd cheered on, City Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake gave the urban-pop star the key to the city.

For Mario, the charity is a deeply personal cause. His mother has struggled for years with heroin addiction. Shawntia Hardaway's story was chronicled on last year's emotional MTV special, *I Won't Love You To Death: The Story of Mario and His Mom*. Sober for a year, Hardaway is now helping Mario with the foundation.

Mario performed two singles from *Go!*, his latest album. Backed by prerecorded tracks, he crooned "Crying Out for Me," his yearning tenor smoothly soaring to a heart-melting falsetto on the chorus. The tender ballad is one of few standouts on the CD. He closed with his latest single, "Music For Love," a rote, bass-heavy ballad that his earnest, well-meaning vocals couldn't quite elevate.

Where Mario is more about technique, Fantasia is all about fiery emotion. From the moment she hit the stage (sporting a sleek, jet-black asymmetrical haircut — a welcome change from the Ronald McDonald-red bob she's been wearing lately), the former *American Idol* was unhinged. She kicked off her heels à la Patti LaBelle and jumped, danced, shook, squatted and danced some more — all while shouting and wailing. Backed by a rather anonymous nine-piece band, Fantasia stormed through cuts from her two albums, the platinum-selling *Free Yourself* (2004) and the gold-selling *Fantasia* (2006).

Nearly all the songs centered on surviving drama brought on by a man who just won't do right. And Fantasia wailed the lyrics with the salty defiance of Dinah Washington, underpinned by the grainy, sanctified squall of Shirley Caesar. There's absolutely no room for self-pity in Fantasia's music. There's always room for celebration of spirit, even when the song lyrics raise eyebrows. She capped her nearly hourlong set with "Baby Mama," her controversial 2004 R&B hit that romanticizes single motherhood. She belted the tune as if it were a hymn.

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