

Music

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FANTASIA RISES TO THE CHALLENGE OF SUDDEN CELEBRITY



By RASHOD D. OLLISON
SUN POP MUSIC CRITIC

That earthy, approachable, homegirl-up-the-block charm is just part of the reason millions gravitated to Fantasia Barrino when she was on *American Idol* last season.

But her most magnetic draw was her vocal style: ripe with church-honed histrionics and appealingly rough around the edges. On the show, Fantasia (she goes by just her first name) tore through any song thrown at her — from Barry Manilow to the Gershwins — with charged vitality. She rightfully strolled away the first-place winner and has since scored platinum with her debut, *Free Yourself*. Two singles from the record — the title cut and “Truth Is” — are in the Top 20 on *Billboard*’s R&B charts. And, shortly before the album hit the streets in November, the first single, “I Believe,” entered the pop charts at No. 1.

The immediate fame — the

million-dollar recording contract, constant traveling, interviews, performances, appearances — has brought some definite changes into the life of the 20-year-old single mother from North Carolina.

“I can’t find a boyfriend,” Fantasia exclaims, following it with a throaty burst of laughter. She’s calling from a tour stop in St. Louis. The singer will perform Sunday at Cavalier Telephone Pavilion at Pier 6 on a bill with brilliant soul artists Rahsaan Patterson and Kem. “For real: It’s harder now to be in relationships. But I get to share my life story with others. I’ve accepted the struggles with this, and I’m blessed. I get to sing and still be ‘Tasia.’”

Her realness, the force of her sassy personality, transcended *American Idol*, on which competitors make a show of being dynamic singers instead of actually being dynamic singers. Once you get past the histrionics and the dramatic flair of her performances and center on her voice,

Fantasia is really no exception. Though there’s no denying her presence on stage, the performer’s vocal ties on record (the thin timbre, the tendency to squawk) are acquired tastes.

On *Free Yourself*, which was overseen by the ever savvy, style-over-substance producer-label honcho Clive Davis, Fantasia’s idiosyncratic vocals are placed in mannered, trend-conscious urban arrangements by Missy Elliott, Jermaine Dupri, Jazze Pha, Rodney Jerkins — proven hit makers in the hip-hop/R&B world. The uptempo cuts are pedestrian, even a bit derivative, but the singer shines on the slower material, especially on the gut-venting “Free Yourself,” a ballad written by Elliott.

It is clear from the heavily stylized, parted-lips promotional shots and overcooked histrionics in the music that J Records, Fantasia’s label, is pushing her to be another urban diva à la Mary J. Blige, with whom the younger vocalist has been compared. Like

MCA did Blige in the 1990s, J seems to have started mythologizing Fantasia’s hard-knock past: a high-school dropout and a mother by age 16 who was sometimes beaten and ultimately abandoned by the baby’s father. There’s a been-there-done-that vibe in the downtrodden love songs on *Free Yourself*, a certain swagger crystallized in songs like “Baby Mama,” which extols, well, baby mamas. Fantasia, whose daughter Zion is 3, has caught some heat for that particular cut.

“I knew I was gonna catch controversy before I recorded it,” she says in her bubbly, slightly hoarse voice. “There was some controversy when I was on *American Idol* because I was a single mom ... Some people think ‘Baby Mama’ is promoting sex and all that. It is not, and it’s not saying it’s cool to be a single mom. I’m talking about what we go through to raise those kids: the sacrifices, those struggles to get diapers and everything else. Those child-support checks

don’t be nothing when you got to feed those kids every day. I have had to get out here and work ‘cause my child needs things. Fantasia has love for all the baby mamas out there struggling. [The song] is an anthem. It encourages, not promote sex.”

By being honest about her experiences in interviews and especially through her music, Fantasia hopes to be a beacon for ‘round-the-way girls dealing with adult issues much too soon.

“I want to be around for a while and share the gift God gave me,” she says. “The fame can be here today and gone tomorrow. I’m just a country girl who’s been blessed. Doors are just opening up now.”

See *Fantasia at Cavalier Telephone Pavilion at Pier 6, President Street and Eastern Avenue at the Inner Harbor, Sunday at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$22-\$53 and are available through Ticketmaster by calling 410-547-SEAT or visiting www.ticketmaster.com.*