

Fantasia takes flight

'American Idol' winner launches her first album **BY PETER GALVIN**

All the recent talk about moral values is nothing new to "American Idol 3" winner Fantasia Barrino. During the show's run, the sassy Barrino caught a lot of flak from viewers who didn't think that a high-school dropout and unwed teenage mother was the best role model for the kids watching every week.

"People badgered me, tried to find out bad things about me," says Barrino, the mother of a 3-year-old daughter, Zion. "You know, there's so many other things going on in the world that people should be worried about than little stuff like that."

Luckily for the world of pop music, Barrino's detractors were in the (moral) minority, and the firebrand singer went on to beat fresh-scrubbed rival Diana DeGarmo in the season finale, watched by 28 million people.

Soon after, Barrino hit No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart with her first single, the mushy "I Believe," co-written by "Idol" alum Tamyra Gray. She also brought thousands of fans to their feet in red and blue states alike as part of the "American Idol" summer tour.

With the release of her first album, "Free Yourself," on Tuesday, the now 20-year-old Barrino is ready to step out of the "American Idol" bubble and become a star in her own right.

"I want to push past being the American Idol," she says. "I just want to be seen as Fantasia Barrino who just loves to do her music."

"Free Yourself" was produced for RCA's J Records by group chairman Clive Davis, who says "the fact that Fantasia comes from 'American Idol' is incidental. She is an artist I would have signed through the normal A&R process."

Though Barrino's album contains some of her signature "Idol" tunes — including the lush "You Were Always on My Mind" and a goosebump-raising "Summertime" — most of the songs are hip-hop-flavored R&B tracks that call to mind recent albums by Beyoncé and Mary J. Blige.

The songs' writers have done a good job of capturing the singer's brash independ-

ent-woman vibe.

"They had all watched me on the show, heard my life story and then wrote the songs for me," Barrino says.

Of the three tracks written and produced by Missy Elliott, "Selfish" is the irresistible standout with its raucous Hindi sample and gorgeous piano breakdown. Other contributors include Jermaine Dupri, Jazze Pha and Harold Lilly.

As lavishly produced as "Free Yourself" is, Barrino's vocals could have easily gotten lost among the booming beats and elaborate drum programming. Instead, in song after song she reaches back to her church roots, pulling notes from deep within and passionately sending them out to the sky.

With such a roster of high-profile collaborators, Barrino and her label are clearly aiming to compete with the likes of Destiny's Child, Alicia Keys and newcomer Ciara for spots on pop radio playlists. Barrino will also be going head to head with past "Idol" stars Kelly Clarkson, Ruben Studdard, Clay Aiken and DeGarmo, all of whom have albums coming out during the holiday season.

The timing of the five "Idol" albums is "coincidental," says Davis. "They each have separate careers, and they are all recording different types of music."

Whatever the fate of the "Idol" releases, nobody can deny that an artist with Barrino's whopping talent deserves to find a place in today's pop marketplace. Nobody, that is, except those who still have a problem with the single-mother issue.

On that score, Barrino remains unapologetic. One of her album's tracks, "Baby Mama," is a kiddie sing-along meant to empower other single mothers.

"I'm going to sing this for all the single moms out there who work hard and do it all by themselves," Barrino says.

And what if some of her detractors see this innocuous ditty as a way to promote single motherhood?

"I'm not worried — God loves single moms," Barrino says with a laugh. "God loves the prostitutes, God loves the drug addicts, God loves everybody!" ♦