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Fantasia does one for the 'baby mamas' on new album

By NEKESA MUMBI MOODY, AP Music Writer

Fantasia is the ultimate around-the-way girl.

From her short-cropped hairdo to her wisecracking slang to her sneakers-before-pumps look, this year's "American Idol" proudly represents that often overlooked demographic: the girl from the street trying to eke out another day.

Nowhere is that more embodied on her new album than on the song "Baby Mama." An ode to single motherhood, the track - whose lyrics occasionally border on "Saturday Night Live" satire - gives a shout out to women supporting their children on their own, struggling to pay the bills and raise their child at the same time.

For the 20-year-old **Fantasia** - sole supporter of her toddler daughter, Zion - it was an anthem long overdue.

"A lot of people make us feel like we should be ashamed, we oughta be ashamed because we're baby's mamas, and that's not so. I ain't promotin' sex, I'm just saying, 'Look - I'm a baby mama,' and that's a ghetto slang," **Fantasia** says in her thick Southern accent, starting to laugh.

"I just kept it real."

That may be the most important key to success for **Fantasia**, who stopped using her last name, Barrino, after winning "Idol." From the start, she was clearly different from past winners: demure Kelly Clarkson, teddy-bear Ruben Studdard and squeaky-clean Clay Aiken.

But her brassy charm endeared her to audiences almost as much as her scratchy, soulful voice. Much like the villainous judge Simon Cowell, **Fantasia** was a personality who made people want to tune into the weekly competition.

"She has more of a story as a musical artist, that's more than a TV show," says producer Jermaine Dupri, who worked with **Fantasia** on the album. "It helps add to the picture."

Now, with this week's release of "Free Yourself," **Fantasia** will find out whether it's enough to translate to commercial success. Based on the track record of her predecessors, she'll probably have a huge start. The debuts from Clarkson, Studdard and Aiken each sold more than one million copies.

Yet there have been indications of late that the "American Idol" glow may be fading.

A recent Billboard magazine article reported that some radio stations have been resistant to playing songs from "Idol" artists. The third annual "Idol" tour last summer played to less-than-capacity crowds. And **Fantasia's** debut single, "I Believe," sold less than the debuts of previous winners, even though it was the best-selling single of the year.

"I think the 'American Idol' thing is wearing people out, and that's a shame because it shouldn't have to reflect on her project," says Rodney Jerkins, another producer on the album.

But legendary music man Clive Davis, who oversaw her J Records debut, scoffs at such reports. He predicts **Fantasia** will get a boost of about a half-million in sales simply because of her "Idol" connection - and that her talent will take her much further.

"As I said when I was the guest judge at the end of the season, I would have signed **Fantasia** if I found her in a basement in Kansas City," he says. "She's the real deal and she just has enormous natural talent."

That talent is buttressed by superstar-level production from the likes of Dupri, Jerkins and Missy Elliott. Although she's best known on "Idol" for her searing renditions of classics like "Summertime" - which is included on "Free Yourself" - the new album is decidedly more contemporary. There's just one other cover, a tear-jerking version of the Willie Nelson gem "You Were Always on My Mind."

There are a couple of rump-shakers, but mostly heart-wrenching soul ballads that seem to solidify her reputation as the next Mary J. Blige.

"I haven't met her, but I like that because she's real," **Fantasia** says of the comparison. "I see myself as just being real. She's real, she's down to earth. She talks about where she comes from, she ain't got no shame in the game."

Neither does **Fantasia**. Though she did recently purchase a massive home for herself and her family in her home state of North Carolina, **Fantasia** - or "Tasia, as she likes to call herself - prides herself on the lack of celebrity-style changes in her life.

"Somebody see me at McDonald's and they'll say, 'What you doin' at McDonald's?'" she says with a wide smile. "And I'm like, 'What you mean? I still like Big Macs, I still like fries, I still eat the same.

"I still live the same ol' 'Tasia life."

Like Blige, she also freely talks about her missteps in life, from dropping out of school in the ninth grade (she's working on getting her diploma) to her teen pregnancy to her dysfunctional relationship with her baby's father.

During that time, **Fantasia** was at her lowest point.

"I started to see my life going downhill. It was like, 'Wait a minute, this ain't what God had for me,'" she says softly. "I just wasn't looking at myself. I just wasn't 'Tasia anymore. I looked in the mirror one day, and I was just like, 'Uh-uh, I gotta do better.'"

Appearing on "American Idol" not only changed her fortunes, but her priorities. Suddenly, hanging out in the streets and partying were no longer important. She had goals, and dreams to pursue.

Now, positioned for stardom, she can't imagine what else life has in store for her.

"Young girl, young mom, done it all, been through it all," she says. "I always tell people, on my 21st birthday, I don't know what I'm going to do."